

# GFL



*German as a foreign language*

**Acquiring ‘different strokes’  
A longitudinal study of the development of L2 pragmatic  
competence**

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## Acquiring 'different strokes'

### A longitudinal study of the development of L2 pragmatic competence

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Learning a language is too often viewed as simply a matter of mastering a distinct system of signs, without reference to the context in which a particular language is used. Recently, research in cross-cultural pragmatics has, however, clearly illustrated that different cultures use language in culturally distinctive ways - a fact which points to a need for language learners to learn about the cultural distinctiveness of the particular speech community in question. In the foreign language classroom, however, pragmatic issues generally remain insufficiently addressed leading to a situation where learners are vulnerable to pragmatic failure and cross-cultural misunderstanding. Time spent in the target speech community remains learners' primary opportunity to acquire pragmatic knowledge. However, the actual extent to which students of German, for example, become "more German" in their use of the German language over a period spent in the target country, remains, as yet, unanswered (cf. Kasper & Schmidt 1996). It is this issue of the development of pragmatic competence over a study abroad period in the target community which is addressed in this paper based on empirical data elicited using a discourse completion task from thirty-three Irish learners of German, twenty-seven Irish native speakers of English and thirty native speakers of German. The approach taken is speech-act based. The paper first focuses on native speaker and learner differences in the employment of lexical and phrasal downgraders in request realisations, before developments in learners' use of these linguistic elements over time in the L2 speech community are discussed.

#### 1. Introductory comments: 'Different strokes for different folks'

The American saying 'different strokes for different folks' aptly summarises what is now a well-established fact in cross-cultural pragmatics – namely, that different speech communities differ in their use of language.<sup>1</sup> Apart from more traditional areas of competence, such as grammatical competence, pragmatic competence is thus also an important area to be addressed in the foreign language classroom (cf. Bachman 1990: 84ff). To become pragmatically competent, learners confront the challenge of acquiring pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence (Leech 1983: 11), the former relating to knowledge of the relevant pragmatic system – i.e. of the range of individual options available for performing various speech acts; the latter referring to knowledge of the appropriate use of the pragmatic system – i.e. how to select the appropriate choice given a particular goal in a particular setting (cf. Rose 1997: 271).

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989a); House & Kasper (1981); Reynolds (1995: 5ff); Tannen (1984) and Wierzbicka (1985).

Pragmatic aspects are, however, only addressed to a rather narrow extent in foreign language classrooms<sup>2</sup> despite recent research findings which point to the teachability of many pragmatic phenomena.<sup>3</sup> This situation is to some extent the result of the historical disregard of phenomena of use prior to the pragmatic turn of the late 1960s (cf. Thomas 1983: 97) – a fact which has led to precise information on pragmatic phenomena not being as readily available to language teachers as, for example, descriptions of grammatical phenomena. Time spent in the target country still remains, therefore, one of the primary opportunity for language learners to acquire pragmatic knowledge. However, the question, as to what extent students become ‘more native-like’ in their use of the L2, i.e. to what extent their pragmatic competence develops over a period in the target country remains, as yet, unanswered, as does the question as to the path any such development may take.

It is to interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), a discipline concerned with "the study of nonnative speakers' comprehension, production, and acquisition of linguistic action in L2" (Kasper 1998b: 184), which we turn for research on such issues. However, since its conception in the early 1980s, ILP, at the interface of second language acquisition (SLA) and pragmatics, has focused on investigating learners' pragmatic knowledge to the detriment of questions of acquisition. The result has been a large body of research on interlanguage (IL) realisations of a wide range of speech acts.<sup>4</sup> Development issues have, however, remained largely neglected, resulting in a lack of understanding of development patterns and indeed of the factors which influence IL pragmatic development. Although there have been a number of pseudo-longitudinal studies in ILP which have focused on developmental issues by employing a cross-

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<sup>2</sup> This has been illustrated, for example, in an empirical study by Bardovi-Harlig/Dörnyei (1998) who carried out a study of the grammatical and pragmatic awareness of 201 ESL teachers and learners of fifteen different L1s living in the USA and also of 507 Hungarian and Italian EFL teachers and learners. They found that both ESL teachers and learners gave more weight to pragmatic errors than to grammatical errors, whereas both EFL groups did the opposite. Bardovi-Harlig/Dörnyei (1998) explain the low pragmatic competence of EFL participants by a possible lack of input and also to an overemphasis on grammatical issues. Cf. also House-Edmondson (1986: 283); House & Kasper (1981: 184); Thomas (1983: 97, 109f) and Watts (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Kasper (1995b: 14; 1997a; 1997b: 122) and Kasper & Rose (1999: 96f) for an overview of studies which investigate the development of pragmatic competence with classroom intervention.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989a: 9ff); Ellis (1994: 167ff); Kasper (1993: 43ff; 1998b: 188ff); Kasper & Blum-Kulka (1993: 4ff) and Kasper & Dahl (1991: 217ff) for references to/ reviews of studies of language use in ILP.

sectional design,<sup>5</sup> pure longitudinal studies remain extremely scarce.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the vast majority of studies which do exist focus on English as an L2; the only studies dealing with German as an L2 being, to the best of my knowledge, the cross-sectional pilot study, Weydt (1981), and the longitudinal study, Barron (1999). Although the number of developmental studies has slowly begun to increase in recent years – via an increase in ILP cross-sectional studies above all – and although a number of key articles have been devoted to such issues (cf. Bardovi-Harlig 1999; Kasper 2000b; Kasper & Rose 1999; Kasper & Schmidt 1996), many questions still remain open. Indeed, Rose (2000: 34), in a recent article on ILP development issues, highlights the current lack of longitudinal studies, noting:

We may have moved beyond the point where we were more than 15 years ago, when Schmidt (1983, p.138) observed that "what is new, in fact just beginning, is systematic study of the actual acquisition of communicative abilities by nonnative speakers," but not much ground has been covered. Although a handful of longitudinal studies have been carried out, far more need to be done.<sup>7</sup>

So lacking is the understanding of pragmatic development, that ILP is said to have ignored one of its main goals, the "acquisition of linguistic action in L2" (Kasper 1998b: 184) and with the exception of studies relating to transfer from L1 to L2, thus largely distanced itself from SLA, one of its parent disciplines, at the core of which lie development issues (cf. Kasper 1992: 204; Kasper & Blum-Kulka 1993: 9), despite various calls made in recent years for longitudinal research to redress this imbalance.<sup>8</sup>

Research on study abroad is equally unenlightening as regards the effect of the year abroad on the development of L2 pragmatic competence. Indeed, despite a widespread belief and a deep intuition that study abroad results in overall linguistic gains, and despite such research

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Kasper & Rose (1999: 82ff) and Rose (1997: 278ff) for a recent review.

<sup>6</sup> Longitudinal studies include only, to the best of my knowledge, those by Bahns et al. (1986); Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford (1993; 1996); Barron (1999; in progress); Bouton (1992; 1994); Cohen (1997); Ellis (1992; 1997); Kanagy & Igarashi (1997); Kasanga (1999); Kondo (1997); Marriott (1995); Raupach 1984; Sawyer (1992); Schmidt (1983); Schmidt & Frota (1986) and Siegal (1995; 1996). Kasper & Rose (1999) and Rose (1997: 276ff) provide an overview of these studies.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford (1993: 280); Ellis (1992: 6; 1994: 173); Gass & Houck (1999: 196f); House (1996: 228); Kasper (1995b: 5f; 1998b: 185); Kasper & Rose (1999: 81); Kerekes (1992: 5); Rose (1997: 275f; 2000: 27f, 34) and Schmidt (1993: 22) who come to similar conclusions.

<sup>8</sup> Cf., for example, calls by Cohen (1996: 261); Doganca-Aktuna & Kamish (1997: 171); Ellis (1994: 181, 186); Kasper (1992: 204; 1993: 51); Kasper & Blum-Kulka (1993: 10); Kasper & Rose (1999: 81) and Kasper & Schmidt (1996).

representing an increasingly important aspect of SLA in the current international climate and the growth of the European Union, little research, in either pragmatics or in other areas of linguistics, has been conducted in the past into the effects of study abroad. As Meara (1994: 32) comments: "Despite the huge amount of resources that the year abroad uses up, there is not a great deal of research on how effective it really is."<sup>9</sup> Although recently the level of research interest in this area of study has increased somewhat - reflected in a number of recent publications on the year abroad,<sup>10</sup> and also in recent work on how best to prepare students for the challenge of the year abroad,<sup>11</sup> there remains, to the best of my knowledge, with the exception of Raupach (1984), Marriott (1995), Siegal (1995) and Kondo (1997), no research on the development of pragmatic competence during study abroad.

The present paper reports on a study designed to meet this obvious research need in some way. Specifically, it concerns a longitudinal study which investigates the development of pragmatic competence in a group of thirty-three Irish students of German who spent ten months studying in the target speech community, Germany, during the academic year 1997/98. Although the longitudinal study investigated a broad range of features relevant to learners' pragmatic competence in realisations of requests, offers, and refusals of offers (cf. Barron in progress), the particular concentration of this paper will be on pragmalinguistic issues relating to requests. Specifically, the focus is on changes in learners' use of internal request mitigation, and particularly on lexical and phrasal downgraders (L&PDs), during a stay abroad.

## **2. Kannst Du mir *kurz mal eben...* geben *bitte*?: Developing internal modification**

Speaking in a polite manner involves being aware of the effect a particular illocutionary force has on one's addressee, and aggravating or mitigating this force by applying a suitable degree

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. also DeKeyser (1991: 104); Freed (1990: 459; 1995: 5, 16); Walsh (1994: 48) and Willis et al. (1977: 5) for similar comments.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Coleman (1996; 1997); Freed (1995); Meara (1994); Parker & Rouxville (1995); Teichler & Maiworm (1997) and Walsh (1995).

<sup>11</sup> Cf., e.g., van Amelsvoort (1999). In addition, a number of projects are being presently conducted in Britain – namely the Intercultural Project based at Lancaster University, the Residence Abroad project based at Portsmouth University, and also the NRAD survey (National Residence Abroad Database), all funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). These projects have recently amalgamated under the heading RAM (Residence Abroad Matters). Cf. LARA (2000), The Interculture Project (2000).

of modification.<sup>12</sup> Request realisations are modified internally by employing modality markers (cf. House & Kasper 1981: 166ff), two types of which are identified, namely upgraders and downgraders. While upgraders intensify the impact of a particular utterance on the addressee, downgraders serve to mitigate the respective illocutionary force.<sup>13</sup> Lexical and phrasal downgraders (L&PDs) – in particular, the downtoner and the politeness marker, 'bitte'/'please' – are the focus of the present study (cf. 3. The Study), and indeed of the following brief research overview.

The small number of longitudinal and cross-sectional studies carried out into the development of L2 pragmatic competence has yielded some evidence that use of internal modification is slow to develop and when it does, that it follows a natural development sequence. Ellis (1992), in a longitudinal study of the development of the pragmatic competence of two pre-teens, aged 10 and 11 years, who acquired English in a second language context over 1 year and 3 months, and 2 years respectively, found, for example, that internal modification was not employed in the initial stages of language learning. Similarly, Sawyer (1992) investigated the use of the sentence-final affective particle 'ne,' a downtoning particle – the function of which is to indicate "the speaker's request for confirmation or agreement from the hearer about some shared knowledge" and thus facilitate the smooth flow of conversation (Sawyer 1992: 85). In his study of eleven adult beginners of Japanese of different L1s over a year in the target speech community, 'ne' was found not to occur in the initial stages.

When L&PDs do start to emerge, it is those L&PDs which are formulaic in nature or which form part of a formulaic utterance which are employed. The politeness marker 'bitte'/'please' is a prime example. This downgrader, also a pragmatic routine (cf. Coulmas 1981: 3), is, as Ellis (1992: 12) notes, the first L&PD to appear in request realisations. Furthermore, Scarcella (1979) in a cross-sectional study of ten beginners and ten advanced learners of English with Arabic as their L1 found that 'please' was one of the first politeness features to appear with requests. Sawyer (1992) also reveals that after some time during the year in the target speech community, the sentence-final affective particle 'ne' appeared in formulas in the Japanese IL, before being eventually liberated from the formula and employed creatively.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Fraser (1980: 342); Holmes (1984: 345) and Trosborg (1995: 209 *passim*).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Blum-Kulka (1991: 258); House & Kasper (1981: 166ff; 1987: 1252f); Kasper (1989: 45) and Trosborg (1995: 209 *passim*).

Downtoners have been shown to appear rather late in IL productions, and even at a late stage do not match NS levels. Trosborg (1995: 260) notes, for example, that her informants - three groups of Danish foreign language learners of English of different levels of proficiency – all used far less downtoners than NS of English in similar request situations.

### 3. The Study

The informants for the present investigation were a group of thirty-three advanced Irish learners of German who spent ten months studying in the target speech community within the framework of the Erasmus program<sup>14</sup> following completion of two years of undergraduate study in the Department of German at University College Dublin, prior to which all students had learned German for between five and six years of second level education. These learners were not aware of the focus of the study. In addition, native speaker (NS) data was elicited from thirty-four NS of German at the University of Hamburg, and twenty-seven Irish NS of English at St. Leo's College, Carlow.

Data was elicited from the learners at three intervals of seven months – prior to (L(1) data), during (L(2) data) and towards the end (L(3) data) of the year abroad, and once from the two NS groups. The instrument employed to elicit NS and learner request realisations was a production questionnaire, namely a discourse completion task (DCT), an instrument used extensively in the field of ILP since its conception.<sup>15</sup> This instrument provides informants with a situational description followed by a dialogue which is to be completed. Situations were coded for social distance and social dominance (cf. Appendix I for an example and an overview of the situations employed in the present analysis). The situations chosen for analysis in this particular paper can be described as non-standard situations, i.e. situations in which there is a relatively low obligation to comply with a request, a relatively high degree of difficulty in

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<sup>14</sup> The ERASMUS programme was established by the European Union on 15th June 1987, and since 14<sup>th</sup> March 1995 has been operating under the umbrella of SOCRATES, the European Community action program for co-operation in the field of education. This scheme provides financial support to enable third-level students to spend an academic term or terms in one of fifteen European countries (cf. ECCLiPS 1996: 1; Teichler & Maiworm 1997: 5).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Beebe & Cummings (1996: 65); Kasper (1998a; 2000a) and Kasper & Dahl (1991: 221ff) for a discussion on the DCT and also information on studies conducted using this instrument in ILP.

performing the request, and a low right to pose the particular request, although it should be noted that these descriptions are relative, rather than absolute (cf. House 1989: 106).<sup>16</sup>

The coding scheme employed in the present study is that which was developed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989b: 275ff) for the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), a large-scale project which investigated native and non-native varieties of request and apology realisations for different social contexts across various languages and cultures using a single coding system (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989a: 16). This particular coding scheme allows a request to be analysed according to the degree of directness and modification employed. Although not without criticism,<sup>17</sup> it is this coding scheme which has proved the most popular for analysing request realisations to date, having been employed in a number of studies, as recently as Rose (2000). Its employment in the present study thus facilitates the comparison of findings with previous research outcomes. In a first step in the analysis, the head act, defined as "the minimal unit which can realise a request" or "the core of the request sequence" (Blum-Kulka 1989b: 275), is isolated, and the strategy employed in this head act established. The CCSARP scheme identifies nine possible request sub-strategies, and three superordinate levels of directness - impositives (direct requests), conventionally indirect requests, nonconventionally indirect requests (cf. Appendix II), where impositives are the most direct, and nonconventionally indirect the least direct (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989a: 18; Kasper 1989: 46). The present analysis concentrates on query preparatory head act strategies (cf. Appendix II). As can be seen in Table 1, this strategy was the most preferred strategy by far in the present data in all five of the non-standard situations analysed in both the German NS and learner data. In the German NS data, for example, average employment was 82.5%; In the learner data (L(1)) it was 84.2%.

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<sup>16</sup> At the other end of the continuum are standard situations, i.e. situations characterised by a relatively high obligation to comply with a request, a relatively low degree of difficulty in performing the request, and a high right to pose the particular request (cf. House 1989: 106).

<sup>17</sup> Criticism comes from researchers such as van Mulken (1996: 692ff) in relation to the theoretical validity of the differentiation between mitigation and indirectness. Van Mulken (1996: 692) questions, for example, whether the modal verb in the hedged performative request strategy (cf. Appendix II) should not preferably be classified as a mitigator, and no differentiation made between performative and hedged performative request strategies. In addition, Hassall (1997: 190f) questions the criteria of selection of the internal modifiers identified, suggesting that address terms should have been included as a positive politeness strategy.

Once the head act strategy is established, any modification is identified. Indeed, given that requests are intrinsically non H-supportive, they provide a rich source of modification. Downgraders often occur as the speaker (S) attempts to lessen the imposition of a particular request on the hearer (H) and provide him/her with as much freedom of will as possible. In other words, downgraders soften the impact of the request on the addressee, and so increase the relative level of indirectness, and thus also of politeness. The L&PDs coded in the present study are detailed in Appendix III. For present purposes, the politeness marker, 'bitte'/'please', and downtoners are of primary importance. Examples of downtoners found include 'vielleicht', 'doch', 'mal', 'eben'/'halt', 'schon', 'ruhig', 'einfach' in German, and 'maybe', 'perhaps' and 'possibly' in English. As will be noted, we are primarily concerned here with the mitigating modal particles in German.<sup>18</sup> 'Vielleicht,' a modal sentence adverbial rather than a mitigating modal particle in non-rhetorical yes-no questions, such as requests, is the only exception in the German realisations (cf. Helbig 1994: 230; Jiang 1994: 44f).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Difficult, some of those little words...

Of the range of L&PDs available for internal mitigation (cf. the list in Appendix III), the two most frequent choices of both the Irish learners of German in the present study prior to their year abroad (L(1)) and also of the German NS were the politeness marker, 'bitte'/'please', and the downtoners.<sup>19</sup> However, the distribution of these L&PDs in the present German data set contrasted considerably with the learner data in the situations under analysis, as can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 1 below. The learners' preferred L&PD was the politeness marker, 'bitte'/'please', whereas that of the German NS was the downtoners, with the politeness markers being employed only to a very limited extent in the German NS data.

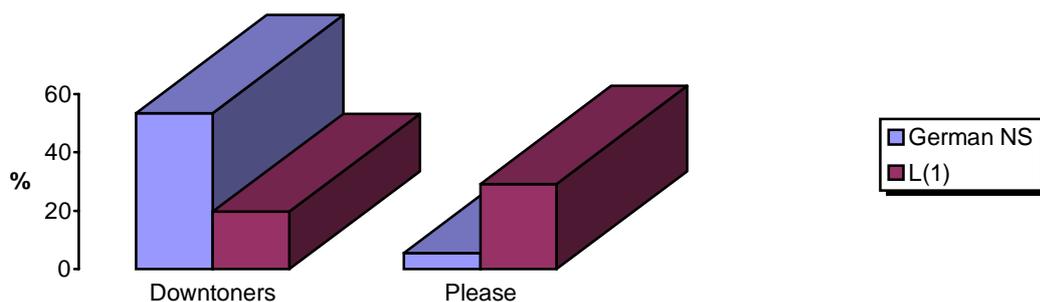
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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Helbig (1994: 32ff, 55ff) for a detailed overview of the characteristics of modal particles.

<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that all downtoners and politeness markers employed, whether appropriately employed or not, were coded here, and also in the following analysis.

**Table 1: Relative distribution of downtoners and 'bitte'/'please' by query preparatory head act strategy in non-standard request situations**

	Situation	Notes	Drive	Teleph.	Grammar	Presentation	Average
German NS	Query Prep. (%)	93.3	90	63.3	75.9	90	82.5
	<b>Downtoners (%)</b>	<b>41.9</b>	<b>57.1</b>	<b>63.6</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>64.5</b>	<b>53.4</b>
	<b>'Bitte'/'please' (%)</b>	<b>17.9</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>5.5</b>
L(1)	Query Prep. (%)	100	97	52.9	82.4	88.9	84.2
	<b>Downtoners (%)</b>	<b>23.5</b>	<b>20.6</b>	<b>16.7</b>	<b>31.2</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>19.7</b>
	<b>'Bitte'/'please' (%)</b>	<b>30.3</b>	<b>9.4</b>	<b>77.8</b>	<b>28.6</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>29.2</b>

**Figure 1: Average relative distribution of downtoners and 'bitte'/'please' with query preparatory head act strategies in non-standard request situations**

In the drive situation, for example, German NS used a downtoner in 57.1% of all utterances realised using a query preparatory head act strategy, whereas in the L(1) data only 20.6% of all such utterances include a downtoner. In the telephone situation, the contrast is even more evident. Here a downtoner was present in 63.6% of all German NS utterances in which a query preparatory strategy was used compared to 16.7% in L(1). Overall, average downtoner use by German NS was 53.4% compared to a mere 19.7% by L(1).

Turning to the use of the politeness marker 'bitte'/'please', the situation is reversed, with L(1) use far exceeding German NS use in each situation except the presentation situation where neither groups employed this L&PD. In the notes situation, for example, 17.9% of German NS employed 'bitte' compared to 30.3% of the L(1) in the same situation and with the same head act strategy. In both data sets, situational variation was evident. Learners, for example, only employed 'bitte'/'please' in 9.4% of all query preparatory strategies in the drive situation and

0% in the presentation situation compared to a high of 77.8% in the telephone situation. Likewise, German NS employment of 'bitte'/'please' in the presentation and drive situations was also lowest (0% in both) – a fact reflecting some degree of learner sociopragmatic competence in these situations. Overall, however, German NS employment reached a mere 5.5%, whereas 29.2% of informants employed 'bitte'/'please' in the L(1) data in these particular contexts. Indeed, this L(1) figure for average use of the politeness marker contrasts with the 19.7% average value for downtoner use in the same situations. In other words, given the choice of using a downtoner or a politeness marker, the learners preferred to opt for the politeness marker prior to the year abroad. In the same situations and using the same request strategy, the German NS clearly revealed an opposing preference – while only 5.5% of such contexts included 'bitte'/'please,' dntoners were employed to 53.4%.

These results support previous findings by Faerch & Kasper (1989: 234) and Trosborg (1995: 260). Faerch & Kasper (1989: 234) note that Danish learners of both German and English tend to underuse dntoners compared to German and English NS, despite a high frequency of modal particles in spoken Danish – a finding which rules out pragmatic transfer as a source of low employment of dntoners. A study by Trosborg (1995), as mentioned briefly above (cf. 2. Kannst Du mir *kurz mal eben ... geben bitte?*: Developing internal modification), shows similar results. Trosborg (1995: 260) found Danish learners of English at all levels of competence to use dntoners to a small extent only when realising requests. Furthermore, Faerch & Kasper (1989) found that Danish learners of German and English make more extensive use of the politeness marker, 'bitte'/'please,' than either group of NS in all situations when using the head act strategy query preparatory (cf. Faerch & Kasper 1989: 232ff) although this was not found by Trosborg (1995: 258).<sup>20</sup>

#### 4.2 'Bitte'/'doch' – so what?

It has been suggested by researchers, such as Firth & Wagner (1997: 292f) and Kasper (1995a; 1995b: 13) that the NS pragmatic norm may not be an appropriate target for learners for a

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<sup>20</sup> Trosborg (1995: 258) explains the lack of overuse of this politeness marker with reference to the standard nature of the situations she employed. However, this explanation does not appear very convincing when the situations are contrasted with the CCSARP continuum of standard/non-standard situations. It is perhaps possible, that the findings are related to the method of data collection, Trosborg having used role-enactment compared to the DCT employed in the present study and also in Faerch & Kasper (1989).

range of reasons, such as the existence of variation in NS language use, flawed NS communication, the fact that L2 pragmatic competence may be an unrealistic ideal, NS' low expectations and negative views regarding learners' pragmatic competence, the existence of potential benefits associated with 'acting the foreigner,' and also the importance of non-nativeness as a strategy of disidentification.

What about the underuse of downtoners in learners' utterances? Is the learners' relative overuse of the politeness marker 'bitte'/'please' not sufficient to render their request realisations in non-standard situations polite? After all, both NS of English and German regard 'bitte'/'please' as a 'magic word' or 'Zauberwort' for getting what they want. We are all familiar with the following exchange between adults and young children:

A: What's the magic word?

B: Please!

A: That's better

– an attempt to teach children the norms of polite behaviour in both the German and Anglo-Saxon cultures. Yet, use of 'bitte'/'please', a pragmatic routine which opens most doors for young children, is rather more complex than it seems. Indeed, its misuse even encompasses scope for pragmatic failure.

The politeness marker 'bitte'/'please' is, contrary to expectation, not only a tool for being polite; rather it performs a double function.<sup>21</sup> It is both an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID) and a transparent mitigator – i.e. it acts to clarify the force of a request, and also functions as a downtoner.<sup>22</sup> Herein lies the difficulty, as findings by House (1989) explain. House (1989) reveals that the dual function of 'bitte'/'please' makes it predominantly suitable for use with either query preparatory or mood derivable strategies in standard situations (cf. Appendix II). This is because the illocutionary force indicating function is in harmony with the context, and so does not 'drown' the downtoning qualities of the adverb. Aijmer (1996: 166)

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. House & Kasper (1981: 167) and Trosborg (1995: 212).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. also Blum-Kulka & Levenston (1987); House (1989) and Sadock (1974).

finds the same tendency in her analysis of ‘please’ in the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English.<sup>23</sup> She writes:

*Please* is especially frequent with imperatives. The large number of *please* after *could you* and after permission question questions (*can I, may I, could I*) is also noteworthy. ... *please* is mainly used in situations in which formal politeness is needed.

In non-standard request situations, however, where the query preparatory strategy, itself somewhat pragmatically ambiguous, is the most frequently employed head act strategy, it is the illocutionary force indicating power of ‘bitte’/‘please’ rather than its mitigating nature which comes to the fore. As a result, any scope for negotiation previously afforded by the query preparatory strategy is curtailed, and the utterance moves nearer the status of an imperative (impositive – cf. Appendix II). The utterance thus becomes "inappropriate" (House 1989: 113), since impositives do not occur in any of the non-standard situations under analysis in the present NS data. NS use of ‘bitte’/‘please’ is thus uncommon in non-standard situations, and common in standard situations.

Use of the pragmatic routine ‘bitte’/‘please’ by learners in non-standard situations may, therefore, clarify the illocutionary force of a particular utterance, but it will not foster compliance or friendship. Instead it may rather lead to misunderstanding and may possibly cause annoyance to the NS who may feel s/he is being ordered about without reason. Indeed, as Davies (1987: 76) notes, the potential for pragmatic failure is especially great at higher proficiency levels, as lack of proficiency is then no longer seen as an excuse for impoliteness. Some examples may serve to illustrate this potential pragmatic failure.

The first example here is from the learner data for the drive situation - a situation for which there were no incidents of ‘bitte’/‘please’ in the German NS data (cf. Table 1, Figure 1).

Drive, A22F:

‘Ich bin zu spät für das Bus. Kann ich in dein Auto zurück nach Hause fahren bitte?’

Instead the German NS typically preferred a different variety of L&PD, the downtoner, as, for example, in ‘vielleicht’/‘perhaps:’

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<sup>23</sup> The London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English is a corpus of almost half a million words of educated British English. The original recordings on which Aijmer's (1996) research is based were made during the 1960s and 1970s at University College, London, as part of the project Survey of English Usage (SEU).

Drive, G16F:

'Entschuldigung, ihr wohnt doch auch in der xy-Straße. Könntet ihr mich vielleicht mit nach Hause nehmen?'

Apart from avoiding undesirable undertones, use of downtoners in German enhances communication, especially communication which extends beyond an exchange of facts to the interpersonal sphere. Downtoners thus aid in opening the doors of acceptance into a foreign culture. Not only does one appear more fluent, more emotional, more expressive, warmer, friendlier, etc. (cf. Harden & Rösler 1981: 72f in relation to the modal particles), but one also signals an understanding of the foreign culture.

### 4.3 Development issues

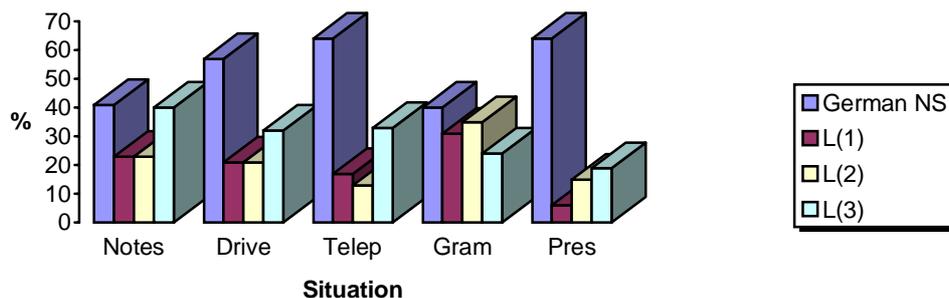
Prior to the year abroad, downtoners were in scarce supply in the L(1) productions of the present group of learner informants compared to the German NS, and the politeness marker 'bitte'/'please' was overused. But did time spent in the target speech community have any effect on the type of internal modification employed by these learners?

A previous cross-sectional pilot study into the degree of learners' use of modal particles in German, carried out by Weydt (1981), yielded results which caused his original hypothesis that modal particle use and time spent in Germany would be positively correlated to be rejected. However, Weydt (1981: 165f) himself emphasises the fact that this was a pilot study with several shortcomings.

The present study contradicts Weydt's findings, revealing a positive correlation of downtoner use with time spent in the target speech community. As illustrated in Table 2 and Figure 2, learners' pragmatic competence in this area clearly improved over time in the L2 speech community.

**Table 2: Relative distribution of downtoners by query preparatory head act strategy in non-standard request situations**

	Situation	Notes	Drive	Telephone	Grammar	Presentation
German NS	Query Prep. (%)	93.3	90	63.3	75.9	90
	<b>Downtoners (%)</b>	<b>41.9</b>	<b>57.1</b>	<b>63.6</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>64.5</b>
L(1)	Query Prep. (%)	100	97	52.9	82.4	88.9
	<b>Downtoners (%)</b>	<b>23.5</b>	<b>20.6</b>	<b>16.7</b>	<b>31.2</b>	<b>6.3</b>
L(2)	Query Prep. (%)	93.8	90.6	37.5	76.7	79.2
	<b>Downtoners (%)</b>	<b>22.6</b>	<b>20.7</b>	<b>13.3</b>	<b>34.6</b>	<b>15</b>
L(3)	Query Prep. (%)	87.9	84.8	39.4	78.8	72.4
	<b>Downtoners (%)</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>32.1</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>24.1</b>	<b>19</b>

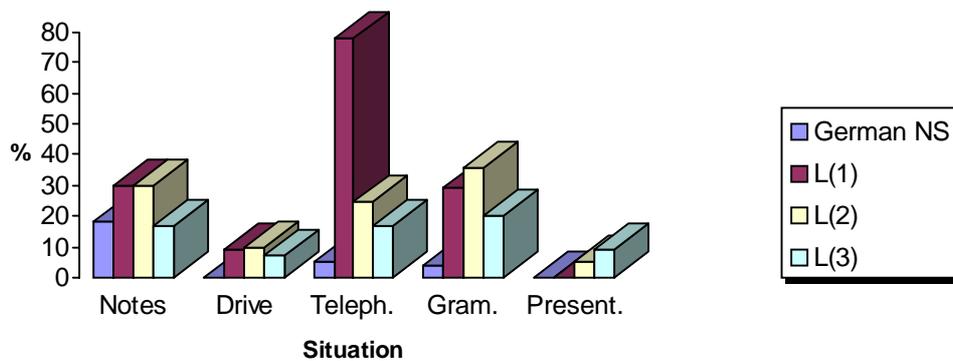
**Figure 2: Relative distribution of downtoners by query preparatory head act strategy in non-standard request situations**

In four of the five non-standard situations the frequency of downtoner use increased and thus moved towards the L2 norm, despite only reaching the L2 norm in the notes situation. In the notes situation, learners' employment of downtoners with a query preparatory strategy was approximately stable in L(1) and L(2) at 23.5% and 22.6% respectively. However, in L(3) downtoner use reached 40%, a percentage which is approximately equal to that of the German NS employment of 41.9%. Likewise, in the drive situation, downtoner use first remained approximately stable at 20.6% in L(1) and 20.7% in L(2). In L(3) the level then rose towards the German NS norm of 57.1% to a level of 32.1%. Only the grammar situation did not reveal the trend towards an increased use of downtoners. Here, rather than increasing, use of downtoners suffered a slight decrease of 7.1% from 31.2% in L(1) to 24.1% in L(3).

**Table 3: Relative distribution of 'bitte'/'please' by query preparatory head act strategy in non-standard request situations**

	Situation	Notes	Drive	Telephone	Grammar	Presentation
German NS	Query Prep. (%)	93.3	90	63.3	75.9	90
	'Bitte'/'please' (%)	<b>17.9</b>	-	<b>5.3</b>	<b>4.5</b>	-
L(1)	Query Prep. (%)	100	97	52.9	82.4	88.9
	'Bitte'/'please' (%)	<b>30.3</b>	<b>9.4</b>	<b>77.8</b>	<b>28.6</b>	-
L(2)	Query Prep. (%)	93.8	90.6	37.5	76.7	79.2
	'Bitte'/'please' (%)	<b>30</b>	<b>10.3</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>36.4</b>	<b>5.3</b>
L(3)	Query Prep. (%)	87.9	84.8	36.4	75.8	72.4
	'Bitte'/'please' (%)	<b>17.2</b>	<b>7.1</b>	<b>16.7</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>9.5</b>

**Figure 3: Relative distribution of 'bitte'/'please' by query preparatory head act strategy in non-standard request situations**



A similar development in the learner data towards the L2 norm was recorded in the use of the politeness marker, 'bitte'/'please,' as is revealed in Table 3 and Figure 3. Here, in the telephone situation, for example, where the most obvious change is to be observed, L(1) use of 77.8% falls to 25% in L(2) and then to 16.7% in L(3). Although NS lows are not reached in any of the situations, as is the case in the telephone situation just discussed where the German NS level is 5.3%, compared to 16.7% in L(3), the trend reflects a consistent movement towards the NS norm. Indeed, only the presentation situation displays a slight increase from 0% in the use of the politeness marker in L(1), to 5.3% and then to 9.5%, and, therefore, movement away from the norm. Overall, however, L(3) situational variation is similar to that in L(1). In both cases the lowest employment of this politeness marker is in the drive and presentation situations – similar to the German NS data.

## 5. Discussing the development...

Extensive target-like increases in learners' use of downtoners and decreases in use of the politeness marker, 'bitte'/'please,' were recorded in the present study over time spent in the target speech community. This movement reflected progress along the stages of the natural order of acquisition of L2 pragmatic features suggested by previous studies (cf. above 2. Kannst Du mir *kurz mal eben ... geben bitte?*). After aspects of formulaic mitigation such as 'bitte'/'please' are mastered, more complex elements, such as the downtoners are acquired. Possible reasons for this move towards the L2 norm during time spent in the L2 context are suggested in the following.

Appropriate input is, of course, an important factor, as recognised by all theories of L2 language acquisition, albeit to differing degrees (cf. Ellis 1994: 243). The dominance of a syntax- and system-oriented linguistics until the pragmatic turn of the late 1960s meant a disregard of issues of use, and thus also of research into the use of spoken language. Consequently, elements of language, such as the modal particles, which appear predominantly in spontaneous, spoken, everyday colloquial language (cf. Helbig 1994: 12; Jiang 1994: 48), were not investigated (cf. Helbig 1994: 5, 13ff, 57; Jiang 1994: 15f), but rather derogatively termed "farblose Redefüllsel" (Lindqvist 1961: 24). Although recently research in pragmatics has begun to leave its mark on foreign language text books which have begun to include such spoken aspects in texts, the traces of history are still apparent - appropriate exercises are still lacking, for example, as Jiang (1994: 15, 20ff, 28f) notes. Related to the lack of appropriate input in the form of text books is the fact that the interpersonal function of language, in which the modal particles play an important role, is often sacrificed in advanced language classes, in particular in favour of the more prestigious referential function (cf. Nikula 1996: 200ff; Watts 2000:3 passim). In addition, as Weydt et al. (1983: 5) note in the introduction to their 'Kleine deutsche Partikellehre' in relation to modal particles, the interpersonal aspects, when addressed in class, typically lack complexity.

Im alltäglichen Leben werden Abtönungspartikeln in komplexen Situationen verwendet. Solche komplexen natürlichen Situationen hat man im Klassenzimmer zumeist nicht.

Added to this is the fact that the spoken input to which learners in the foreign language classroom are exposed is usually tape-recordings of German, which, as Watts (2000:2) notes, is normally only available to students in oral form once they reach an advanced level of linguistic competence. As a result, it can not be consulted at a later point in time. Learners also

have access to their classmates' German, and, most of all, to their teacher's German, the latter who, in the interest of comprehensibility, may use teacher talk (cf. Gaies 1977), and filter non-referential aspects of language, such as the modal particles from his/her idiolect (cf. Vorderwülbecke 1981: 149). Indeed, Ohta (1994: 315) finds that there are overall fewer types of affective particles employed in the elementary Japanese as a Foreign Language classrooms than in ordinary conversation.

Furthermore, the multiple communicative functions of modal particles make them difficult to learn, and indeed also to teach. Jiang (1994: 44) notes that in requests the modal particles "geben dem Hörer das Signal, wie er die Aufforderung auffassen soll und welches Verhalten von ihm verlangt wird". Each modal particle communicates different information to the hearer in this regard – i.e. the pragmatic function of a particular particle can change with changing context (cf. Helbig 1994: 113 passim; Weydt et al. 1983: 5 passim). In requests, 'doch' can express impatience, as in "Komm doch endlich zum Essen" or it may serve to increase the degree of politeness of the request, as in "Setzen Sie sich doch!" (Helbig 1994: 113). Such ambiguity is difficult to address for learner and teacher alike. Furthermore, the fact that the modal particles have homonyms in other word classes (cf. Abraham 1991: 1ff; Jiang 1994: 13, 30ff) also increases learning difficulties.<sup>24</sup>

Given lack of exposure to the interpersonal side of language in the foreign language classroom, it may be suggested that learners' exposure to spoken input over the year abroad necessarily meant exposure to downtoners, and in particular to the context-dependent nature of the modal particles due to their high frequency in spoken language. As a result, the interpersonal function of language, long disregarded, became activated as never before.

On the production-side, it is clear that the opportunities afforded learners for using the foreign language are far more extensive in the study-abroad context than in the foreign language classroom. Prior to the year abroad, it is possible that the students experienced cognitive overload being faced with the challenge of communicating in their L2 outside the framework of the classroom situation. It may be suggested, therefore, that they concentrated primarily on the basic lexical and syntactic elements in order to get their message across (cf. Ellis 1992). Indeed, since the modal particles, having neither semantic meaning nor syntactic content, have

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<sup>24</sup> 'Doch' can, for example, mean 'yes' in response to a negative question. It can, however, also be employed as a co-ordinating conjunction, as in 'Ich wollte an den Strand, doch es fing an zu regnen.'

no propositional content (cf. Helbig 1994: 12f, 34f; Jiang 1994: 25f), but rather communicative function only, it not surprising that they are often omitted in favour of elements with a referential function. This suggestion is substantiated by the type of mitigation employed by the learners – in the L(1) data they tended to prefer the explicit modifier, the politeness marker, in keeping with learners' recorded preference for a 'playing-it-safe' strategy (cf. Faerch & Kasper 1989: 245).

Also, as Faerch & Kasper (1989: 234) and Trosborg (1995: 427f) report, the downtoner demands a higher level of pragmalinguistic competence of learners than the politeness marker as it is relatively more difficult to employ than the politeness marker –the latter can be placed extrasententially, demanding less planning at the psycholinguistic level, whereas the downtoner either occurs in initial position or is, as is the case of the modal particles, embedded. As such, use of 'bitte'/'please' represents an easy way out for learners as also found in the present study where the politeness marker was not only overused in the L(1) request data relative to the L2 norm, but also placed extrasententially rather than being embedded as is the norm in German NS productions (cf. Barron in progress). The shift in learners' lexical and phrasal mitigation from the politeness marker 'bitte'/'please' to the cognitively more complex downtoner over time in the present study seems to suggest that confidence in use has increased (cf. Steinmüller 1981: 140 in relation to the modal particles), and, indeed, to a higher degree of control over the requesting speech act.

## 6. Concluding comments

The analysis of data gathered on three occasions over ten months spent by a group of advanced Irish learners of German in the target speech community revealed significant changes in the use of internal mitigation over time. Prior to the year abroad these learners' request realisations were shown to encompass potential for pragmatic failure due to overuse of the politeness marker, 'bitte'/'please.' Over time, however, lexical mitigation, while not reflecting L2 norms, did become increasingly complex and L2-like, increasingly taking the form of downtoners.

This change in learners' lexical mitigation over time spent in the target speech community offers insights into the developmental path which learners' use of lexical mitigation takes over time spent in the target speech community, and also exemplifies the importance of appropriate

input in the development of L2 pragmatic competence. As such, it also provides some confirmation of the widely-held, yet poorly researched belief (cf. DeKeyser 1991: 104, Freed 1995: 9), that time spent in the target speech community leads to a more native-like use of language – or – to ‘different strokes.’

**Appendix I**

**Example of a DCT item:**

**AT THE UNIVERSITY**

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

Anne: -----  
 -----  
 -----

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

**DCT non-standard request situations employed in the present study**

<b>Request Situation</b>	<b>Synopsis of Situation: Request .....</b>	<b>Social Distance</b>	<b>Social Dominance</b>
<b>Notes</b>	notes from a friend	- SD	x = y
<b>Telephone</b>	a stranger for change for telephone	+ SD	x = y
<b>Grammar</b>	by student for lecturer's help in understanding grammar	- SD	x < y
<b>Drive</b>	a drive home from a colleague/ neighbour	+ SD	x < y
<b>Presentation</b>	by lecturer to change date of presentation	- SD	x > y

*SD: social distance, x = speaker, y = hearer*

## Appendix II

Coding scheme for request strategies<sup>25</sup>

	Strategy	Description	Example
<b>Impositives</b>	<b>1. Mood derivable</b>	Utterances in which the grammatical mood of the verb signals the illocutionary force	Police, G18M: Bitte fahren Sie Ihr Auto weg. (Please move your car)
	<b>2. Explicit performative</b>	Utterances in which the illocutionary force is explicitly named	Kitchen, G3F: Ich bitte Dich, das Geschirr innerhalb der nächsten ½ Stunde abzuwaschen.  (I'm asking you to wash up the dishes within the next ½ an hour..)
	<b>3. Hedged performative</b>	Utterances in which the illocutionary force is named, but also modified by hedging expressions	Grammar, G24F: Ich wollte Sie um Ratschläge bitten, in welchem Buch ich gute Erklärungen finden kann.  (I wanted to ask your advice in which book I can find a good explanation)
	<b>4. Locution derivable<sup>26</sup></b>	Utterances in which the illocutionary force is evident from the semantic meaning of the locution	Kitchen, G18M: Machst du bitte mal die Küche sauber?  (Will you em tidy the kitchen please?)
	<b>5. Want statement</b>	Utterances which state the speaker's desire that the act is carried out	Presentation, G27M: ... es wäre gut, wenn Du Dein Referat schon nächste Woche halten könntest.  (... it would be good if you could do your presentation next week)
<b>Conventionally indirect requests</b>	<b>6. Suggestory formula</b>	Utterances which contain a suggestion to do x	Kitchen G29F: ... Wie wär's, wenn Du Dich deshalb den Chaos in der Küche annehmen könntest, ...  (... How would it be so, if you could clear the chaos in the kitchen, ..)
	<b>7. Query preparatory</b>	Utterances in which the preparatory conditions of a request (e.g. ability, willingness, possibility) are addressed as conventionalised in any specific language	Kitchen, G17F: Kannst Du nicht bitte Deine Sachen von gestern gleich wegmachen?  (Can't you please tidy away your things from yesterday now?)
<b>Non-conventionally indirect requests</b>	<b>8. Strong hint</b>	Utterances containing partial reference to objects or elements needed for the implementation of the act	Kitchen, G15M: Beim jetzigen Zustand der Küche kann ich schlecht kochen. (The way the kitchen looks

<sup>25</sup> The examples given here and in Appendix III are taken from the data of the present study and all translations are the responsibility of this author. Downtoners, in particular, were difficult to translate - cf. Appendix III, downtoners, on this.

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that this fourth most direct strategy here, locution derivable, is sometimes given as an obligation statement, i.e. an utterance which communicates H's obligation to carry out a certain act. This is the strategy which is listed, for example, in the introduction to the edited edition on the CCSARP project (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989a: 18), despite the fact that the more extensive appendices (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989b) refer to locution derivables.

			now, I can't very well cook)
	<b>9. Mild hint</b>	Utterances containing no direct reference to objects or elements needed for the implementation of the act. Instead the H is forced to interpret the relevance of the utterance in relation to the context	Notes, G6M: Judith, Du bist doch eine Frau .. und Frauen müssen doch zusammenhalten .. und ich war doch vorgestern nicht da.. und da dachte ich .. ich könnte ...  (Judith, you're a woman ... and women have to stick together.. and I wasn't there the day before yesterday.. and I thought.. I could)

Level 1: G = German NS, A = learner, E = Irish English NS; Level 2: Informant no.; Level 3: M = Male, F = Female

### Appendix III

#### Coding scheme for lexical and phrasal downgraders: Requests

	Description	Realisations	Example
<b>1. Politeness marker</b>	Represents an effort to seek co-operation	bitte/ please	Telephone, G15M: Entschuldigung, könnten Sie mir bitte mit etwas Kleingeld aushelfen?  (Excuse me, could you help me out with some change, <u>please</u> ?)
<b>2. Understater</b>	Adverbial modifiers that under-represent the situation presented in the proposition	ein bißchen/ etwas/ a bit/ a little	Telephone, G3F: Wäre es möglich, daß Sie mir <u>etwas</u> Kleingeld leihen? (Would it be possible to lend me <u>some</u> change?)
<b>3. Hedge</b>	Adverbials employed in order to avoid giving precise details	irgendwie/ somehow/ kind of/ sort of	Presentation, G13F: Ich bin gerade den Seminarplan durchgegangen und stelle fest, daß Ihr Referat viel besser in der nächsten Sitzung passen würde. Können Sie das <u>irgendwie</u> einrichten? (I'm just after going through the course plan and I see that your presentation would be much better next week. Could you manage that <u>somehow</u> ?)
<b>4. Subjectiviser</b>	Elements which express a speaker's subjective opinion with regard to the situation referred to in the proposition	ich fürchte/ I'm afraid; I wonder; ich denke/ I think; ich glaube/ I believe; ich nehme an/ I suppose; In my	Presentation, E7F: <u>I was wondering</u> if you could ...

		opinion	
<b>5. Downtoner</b>	Sentential or propositional modifiers employed to moderate the force of a request on the addressee	vielleicht; doch; mal; eben/halt; schon; ruhig; einfach;  perhaps/ possibly/ maybe; just	Notes, G4F: ... Könntest Du mir Deine Aufzeichnungen <u>mal</u> leihen?  (... Could you <u>er could you</u> lend me your notes?) <sup>27</sup>
<b>6. Cajoler</b>	"Conventionalized speech items whose semantic content is of little transparent relevance to their discourse meaning" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989b: 284), their discourse function being the establishment, restoration or extension of harmony between the H and S	weißt Du/ wissen Sie/ you know; verstehen Sie/ you understand; siehst Du/ sehen Sie/ you see; actually/ eigentlich	Presentation, A1F: Ich habe bemerkt, daß dein Referat über die Staatstheorie des Aristoteles <u>eigentlich</u> viel besser für die Sitzung nächste Woche passen würde.  (I noticed that your presentation on Aristoteles' State theory would <u>actually</u> be much better for the class next week)
<b>7. Appealer</b>	Elements whose function it is to evoke a hearer signal of understanding	Tags: nicht?/ oder?/ ja?/ okay?/ will you?/ aren't we?	Drive, C6M: ... Könnte ich vielleicht mit Ihnen fahren, <u>oder</u> ?  (...Could I maybe go with you, <u>yes</u> ?)
<b>8. Consultative Device</b>	Elements chosen to involve the hearer directly in an effort to gain compliance <sup>28</sup>	Glaubst du?/ Meinst du?/ do you think?	Presentation, G1F: ... Die Staatstheorie des Aristoteles ist ja für in zwei Wochen geplant. Es würde aber nächste Woche viel besser rein passen. <u>Meinst du</u> , es wäre möglich?  (... Aristoteles' State Theory is planned for two weeks time. It would be much better next week though. <u>Do you think</u> , that would be possible?)

Level 1: G = German NS, A = learner, E = Irish English NS; Level 2: Informant no.; Level 3: M = Male, F = Female

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<sup>27</sup> This translation, and similar translations here, highlight the difficulty of finding an equivalent for German downtoners in English. House & Kasper (1981: 177) note that hesitators are often used in English where downtoners are used in German, hence this translation.

<sup>28</sup> In the CCSARP coding scheme consultative devices are merged with 'bitte'/'please' and called politeness markers. In the present analysis, they are, however, separated for reasons of clarity, a step also taken by House & Vollmer (1988: 120).

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