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"Can I have a cup of tea please?" Politeness markers in the Spoken BNC2014

Abstract: Politeness is one of the stereotypes associated with the British that seems to be crucial in terms of their self-identification and self-perception. The focus of this study is four frequently-used politeness markers: *please, thank you, thanks,* and *sorry*. The paper aims to precisely identify the different senses of these words in the newly released corpus of spoken British English, the Spoken British National Corpus 2014. The findings of this analysis reveal that the markers under investigation are primarily used in their core senses, such as politely requesting something, showing gratitude, or apologising; other identified senses include self-correcting and being confrontational or ironic. The analysis of the authentic data helps us classify senses for each of the target words based on different contextual situations.

Keywords: British English; corpus-based analysis; informal conversations; politeness markers; Spoken BNC2014

1 Introduction

Politeness is one of the basic features of human communication. It is a complex phenomenon that manifests itself at various levels of the communicative act. Politeness is also culture-specific, involving patterns of communication that vary from culture to culture and from language to language (Márquez-Reiter 2000: 1). Every language has a collection of words that are typically associated with politeness, which are known as politeness markers (Aijmer 2015: 89; Kádár and House 2021: 80). These markers are context-sensitive, which means they have different senses depending on the context in which they are used (Baker 2017: 230).

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Politeness markers have long been of interest to linguists, who have conducted research into how politeness functions in different cultures. Márquez-Reiter (2000) compared politeness in Britain and Uruguay, Kádár and House (2020) examined the English *sorry* and its Chinese counterpart *duibuqi*, while Hickey and Stewart (2005) published a collection of articles on politeness in European countries. There has also been interest in how pragmatic markers differ between varieties of English. Contributing to variational pragmatics, Mazzon (2019) studied the parenthetical construction *I'm afraid* across varieties of English. Murphy and De Felice (2019) analysed the use of *please* in two comparable British and US workplace email corpora. Baker's (2017: 222–234) analysis of the differences between British and US English politeness markers in the Brown family contributed to our interest in the present study.

In this paper we would like to demonstrate how the use of authentic corpus data of spoken English can provide insights into the sense variability of politeness markers in contemporary British English. Murphy and De Felice (2019) and Baker's (2017: 222–234) studies used corpora consisting exclusively of written texts; however, Baker (2017: 223) points out that pragmatic markers belong primarily to the repertoire of spoken language. Their strong connection to spoken language is the reason why they are often associated with colloquialisation (Baker 2017: 225). That is why for this study, we decided to employ a newly designed and released corpus of spoken British English, the Spoken British National Corpus 2014 (henceforth the Spoken BNC2014). This corpus contains approximately 11.5 million tokens of informal spoken language produced by speakers of British English, primarily from England in the mid-2010s (Love 2020: 181). The Spoken BNC2014 can be seen as representative of present-day English.

In order to identify how the users of present-day spoken British English employ politeness markers in informal conversations, this study analyses *please*, *thank you*, *thanks* and *sorry* in the Spoken BNC2014. These lexical units are generally treated as the most characteristic politeness markers in present-day English (Baker 2017: 230). The key research aim is to identify the senses of these markers based on different contextual situations. For this purpose, a representative sample of 100 randomised concordances for each of the four politeness markers in question was extracted from the Spoken BNC2014. The concordance and collocation analyses help identify their precise senses in spoken British English within various contexts. Based on authentic examples of use, these senses were then classified for each of the target words, which gave us an opportunity to outline the polysemic nature of these lexical units and define the contextual constraints characteristic of each of the senses.

The hypothesis presented in this study puts forward two points for discussion. First, the assumption that a detailed analysis of the spoken corpus enables us to identify and define a more specific nature of the attitude conveyed by each of the

selected politeness markers. This will provide more insight into which contexts the target words are used in their core senses and therefore express politeness. Second, a systemic analysis of the data will show that the core sense of these markers can be subverted in certain contexts in order to convey irony or sarcasm.

This paper is organised as follows: Section 2 introduces the Spoken BNC2014 in more detail, elaborating on the advantages and drawbacks of using it for the analysis of spoken English; it also describes the methods of analysis employed in the study. Section 3 introduces contemporary theories on politeness, while Section 4 provides a detailed discussion of the findings and compares these findings with previous studies on politeness. Finally, the conclusion summarises the major findings of the study and provides ideas for further research.

2 Data and methods of analysis

The Spoken BNC2014 is part of a large general corpus known as the British National Corpus 2014, which is a 100-million-word corpus of present-day British English constructed at Lancaster University. The BNC2014 has been designed as a comparable counterpart to the original BNC1994, which was compiled in the early 1990s. Both corpora provide "a snapshot of language and a window into social history, at the time of its compilation" (Brezina et al. 2021: 595). The Spoken BNC2014 was publicly released in 2017 via the platform CQPweb (Hardie 2012). The corpus is the result of a collaboration between Cambridge University Press and the ESRC Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Sciences (CASS) at Lancaster University (Brezina et al. 2018: 4).

For the corpus design of the Spoken BNC2014, three key aspects were considered: target domain, internal strata and text length (Love 2020: 42–45). In contrast to the Spoken BNC1994, the range of text types in the Spoken BNC2014 was restricted to informal conversations only. In addition to population, the time period of collection also constituted part of the target domain. When the project was launched, the year 2012 was fixed as the lower limit, while the data collection ended in 2016, making the time period for the target domain the mid-2010s (Love 2020: 42–44). The second consideration was the internal strata of the speakers, as there were four main demographic strata that were intended to be incorporated into the corpus design: (i) gender, (ii) age, (iii) socio-economic status, and (iv) (regional) dialect (Love 2020: 44). Finally, the third and last concern was text length. Since the corpus texts comprise informal conversations, the text length was framed in terms of minutes recorded rather than in terms of tokens (Love 2020: 44–45). The final target domain for the Spoken BNC2014 was described by Love (2020: 45) as "informal spoken British English, produced by L1 speakers of British English in the mid-2010s, whereby 'British English' comprises four major varieties: English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish English."

In sum, the Spoken BNC2014 contains 11,422,617 tokens, which were produced by 668 distinguishable speakers within 1,251 transcribed recordings (Love 2020: 181). Table 1 provides detailed information about the speakers included in the Spoken BNC2014.

A few distinct features of this corpus should be emphasised here. As Table 1 illustrates, first, the number of tokens produced by female speakers is almost double those produced by male speakers. Second, in terms of demographic representation, with over 9.5 million tokens (83.9%), English spoken in England is overrepresented, while varieties of Scottish, Welsh and Irish English are underrepresented, which is similar to the Spoken BNC1994. In terms of age, groups from age 30 to 69 comprise over one million tokens each, while a group from age 19 to 29 comprises over four million tokens (Love 2020: 181–183). These features of the corpus design show that there are certain advantages and drawbacks to using the Spoken BNC2014 for the analysis of present-day British English. Nonetheless, the corpus is still a valuable source of data for the purpose of this study. It should be kept in mind that the findings of this study primarily illustrate the use of politeness markers by young and middle-aged educated speakers from England.

This study represents a synchronic corpus-based analysis of four frequently-used politeness markers, namely *please, thank you, thanks* and *sorry*, in the Spoken BNC2014. The data was accessed using the computer software CQPweb developed by Hardie (2012). Since the total number of occurrences of each of the target words is too high for the scope of this study (cf. Table 2), we decided to extract a representative

Table 1: Metadata for the Spoken BNC (Love 2020: 182; abridged).

Category	Group	No. speaker IDs	No. tokens
Gender	Female	365	7,072,249
	Male	305	4,348,982
	N/A	1	1,375
Age range	19–29	250	4,192,329
	30–39	89	1,661,116
	40–49	76	1,630,520
	50–59	77	1,166,898
	60–69	65	1,065,120
Regional dialect	England	530	9,587,394
	Scotland	9	33,101
	Wales	17	201,257
	N_Ireland	1	861
	R_Ireland	6	29,907
	non_uk	11	129,109
	Unspecified	97	1,440,982

Table 2: Raw and relative frequencies of *sorry*, *thank you*, *thanks* and *please*.

Target politeness markers	Raw frequencies	Relative frequencies
Sorry	5,539	484.915
Thank you	3,736	327.070
Please	2,793	244.515
Thanks	1,267	110.920

sample of 100 randomised concordances for each politeness marker in question. The context was set to two sentences on both the left and the right in order to enable the precise identification of the context. Concordance and collocation analyses were employed for the identification of the senses of the target words. The key goal of the study is to identify typical contexts in which speakers of present-day British English use politeness markers in order to in turn identify what kinds of attitudes characterise the full semantic and pragmatic potential of the selected markers, from demonstrating respect and gratitude to eliciting ironic or sarcastic responses.

After having identified the frequencies of the four politeness markers in question, we identified their senses within a variety of contexts. Based on authentic examples, these senses were classified for each of the target words. Special attention was paid to the question of whether the target word was actually being used to express politeness or something else entirely. Working with authentic corpus data has allowed us to identify collocation patterns and syntactic regularities characteristic of each of the senses. Our linguistic analysis demonstrates that the polysemous structure of the politeness markers under investigation should be regarded as an element of the language system in its semantic as well as in its pragmatic aspect.

Finally, a few more points regarding the analysis of spoken data should be briefly referred to. The Spoken BNC2014 is a valuable source of data for the purpose of this study; nonetheless, a few limitations of this corpus and difficulties in terms of the analysis should be addressed here. To the best of our knowledge, this corpus does not contain any information regarding intonation and stress patterns of the utterances, which is why it was sometimes difficult to identify the sense of target words, especially in instances of the sarcastic use of politeness markers. Wichmann (2005: 229) states that intonation "has the power to reinforce, mitigate or even undermine the words spoken". In some cases, a few words were missing from the recording or were marked as unclear, which made it difficult to accurately grasp the communicative context. Additionally, all of these conversations were recorded as private interactions between family members and friends, so some of the speakers refer to things that relate to a previous conversation or are considered common

knowledge, which meant that additional information was needed for the analyst to be able to understand the whole context. All of these limitations should be taken into consideration when analysing any corpus containing spoken data.

3 Politeness markers and theories on politeness

Section 3 is designed to provide a brief overview of the current state of research on pragmatic markers, focusing particularly on the studies of politeness markers.

Speech items contributing to the meta level of communication could be characterised under the umbrella term pragmatic markers. Such markers are pervasive in spoken language (Baker 2017: 223; van Olmen and Tantucci 2022: 147), but they could also be omitted from an utterance without changing its meaning; however, without them, an utterance might come across as too abrupt or unfriendly – see also Tantucci (2021) on intersubjectivity and the ways speakers monitor and project their interlocutors' reactions.

Fedriani and Sansò (2017: 2) differentiate between pragmatic and discourse markers, arguing that pragmatic markers could be described as markers of function for social and interpersonal cohesion, while discourse markers are used to ensure textual cohesion. Fraser (1996: 168) defines pragmatic markers as "the linguistically encoded clues which signal the speaker's potential communicative intentions". According to Fraser (1996: 184), discourse markers are a specific category of pragmatic markers that "do not contribute to the representative sentence meaning, but only to the procedural meaning", in which "they provide instructions to the addressee on how the utterance to which the discourse marker is attached is to be interpreted". Discourse markers have both conceptual and procedural meaning; they function as a guide for the hearer in terms of how to interpret an utterance. Syntactically, they can be described through their position in an utterance or in what type of sentence they occur (Aijmer 2015: 88–90). In a similar fashion, Traugott (2016: 31) delineates typical characteristics of pragmatic markers: they neither impact the truth value of an utterance, nor do they change or add to the propositional content. Even though pragmatic markers are not fixed in their position, they are prone to appearing either at the right- or left-hand periphery of an utterance (Fedriani and Sansò 2017: 3; Traugott 2016).

Words associated with politeness are subsumed under the term politeness markers. In English, these include, but are not limited to *please, thank you*, *thanks* and *sorry*. There are also other strategies that can be used to signal respect for one's interlocutors. In the context of making a request, the decision to formulate conventionally indirect requests through an impersonal construction could be interpreted as a politeness strategy. For example: "I was wondering if there'd be any

possibility of borrowing a company car?" (Márquez-Reiter 2000: 106). In this example, the speaker does not actually ask to borrow a car, but the request is implied; the meaning behind these conventionally indirect speech acts might have been conserved over time, and the instruction "I want to borrow a car" is understood automatically (Márquez-Reiter 2000: 42–43). British indirectness is often used to fuel humour about British cultural stereotypes. The level of indirectness within British culture is joked to be so severe that people from continental Europe cannot understand it without "translation" services (Culpeper and Gillings 2018: 34). In this regard, Baker (2017: 165) likewise states: "British politeness is internationally renowned as puzzling to visitors to the UK."

Words generally tend to have numerous related senses and this phenomenon is known as polysemy. Polysemy seems to be the norm; while new words might at first be monosemous and only have one sense, these normally become polysemous very quickly (Carston 2020: 109–110). The nature of polysemy may be defined as the ability of a word to display a variety of semantic nuances within different contexts. This variability retains the relevance of its semantic core as the key principle determining the contextual potential of the word in all of its senses. This study traces and identifies such senses for each of the politeness markers under discussion and outlines the hierarchical structure of the senses of each of these words.

The words chosen for this study are typically associated with politeness, but they are not always used in a polite manner; they can also be used in an ironic way or in some forms of negation. Baker (2017: 231) provides two contexts in which *please* and *sorry* can be interpreted as rude or even dismissive: "And please stop considering yourself as a victim – it is not attractive" (cf. Table 3 and the analysis of *please don't* in Section 4.1) and "'I'm sorry but I'm not going to argue the point any longer,' he said, turning towards the door". Importantly, the use of politeness markers not only differs between languages, but also between varieties of the same language. While Watts (2003: 183) labels *please* as "the most obvious example of a politeness", this marker is described by Murphy and De Felice (2019: 77) as a word that divides British and US English. According to them, *please* occurs more frequently in British English, and the difference in usage can lead to intercultural friction between speakers of British and US English. They state that while US-Americans tend to use *please* if something exceeds expectations, it is part of routine politeness for the British, which might be a reason for the difference in frequency (Murphy and De Felice 2019: 78). In relation to this, Culpeper and Gillings (2018: 34) argue that for many British parents *please* appears to be the "magic word" to making successful requests. Similar to *please*, *thank you* is often seen as an indication of politeness (Culpeper and Gillings 2018: 42).

In line with the concept of this routine politeness for British speakers, Kádár and House (2021: 81) attempted to reconceptualise politeness markers as "ritual

frame indicating expressions" (RFIEs). They describe RFIEs as expressions that are not necessarily used as politeness markers, but rather as markers of standard situations that are vital in terms of signalling a "ritual frame". This means that it is possible for us to adapt the way we use and perceive language in order to exhibit linguistic awareness of who and where we are. "Ritual frames" are rather abstract concepts which can be defined as a "cluster of standard situations in which rights and obligations prevail […] to maintain one's sacred face" (Kádár and House 2020: 85). In this case, face stands for "socially situated identities people claim or attribute to others", and the so-called "face work" consists of communicative strategies for enacting, supporting, or challenging these identities (Goldsmith 2000: 2). The idea of ritual frames has its roots in the concept of face and the phenomenon of politeness; however, while politeness is supposedly an individual performance, ritual is seen as a form of behaviour that is communally oriented (Kádár and House 2021: 82–83). Kádár and House (2021: 83) argue that "the more conventional the meaning of a particular RFIE becomes, the less directly related it will be to individualistic politeness", but will rather be open to being used as a sign of a ritual frame.

Finally, it is also essential to briefly mention Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory of politeness, which is also based on the discussed notion of face and focuses on the strategies employed by individuals in order to save either their own or the hearer's face if it is threatened. This theory is criticised by Culpeper (2011: 6), who argues that it overlooks impoliteness and focuses exclusively on harmonious conversations. In relation to impoliteness, he also suggests that it is not uncommon for people to be offended by how something is said instead of by what is said (Culpeper 2011: 2). This overview demonstrates a variety of perspectives on analysing the function of politeness markers in discourse. In this paper, we approach them as lexical units with a sense structure that determines the variety of contexts in which they tend to be used.

4 Corpus-based analysis of politeness markers

Section 4 presents a corpus-based analysis of the four politeness markers *please*, *thank you*, *thanks* and *sorry*. Table 2 provides the raw and relative frequencies per 1 million words of these target words. It is important to mention that Table 2 includes all occurrences of these words in the Spoken BNC 2014, namely *please* as a politeness marker and a verb; *thank (you)* as a compound politeness marker and a verb; *sorry* as a politeness marker and an adjective. Due to part-of-speech tagging issues, it was difficult to extract only cases involving the use of politeness markers because, for example, all occurrences of *sorry* were tagged as adjectives. However, instances of *please* and *thank (you)* occurring as verbs were identified as rare in the corpus of

spoken English. For further analysis, 400 expanded concordances were extracted that contained occurrences of *please*, *thank you*, *thanks* and *sorry* only as politeness markers.

As Table 2 shows, *sorry* is the most frequently used target word with 5,539 occurrences, while *thanks* is the least frequent with 1,267 occurrences. *Thank you* appears almost three times as often as *thanks* and occurs a total of 3,736 times in the corpus. *Thank you* is also more frequent than *please*, which has a total of 2,793 occurrences. This stands in contrast to Baker's (2017: 230) findings from the Brown family of corpora, according to which *please* has a higher frequency than *thank you* in British English. Although when drawing this comparison, it is important to remember that the Brown family of corpora consists exclusively of written texts.

4.1 Analysis of *please*

Through the analysis of 100 concordances containing *please*, five distinct senses of *please* were detected in the Spoken BNC2014. *Please* can be used in the following contexts:

> Sense 1: politely making a request or asking for permission,
> Sense 2: politely giving instructions,
> Sense 3: politely accepting something or agreeing to something,
> Sense 4: expressing urgency,
> Sense 5: expressing surprise, irritation or irony.

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the identified senses in the randomised sample of 100 concordances extracted from the Spoken BNC2014.

Using *please* in requests is by far the most frequent of the identified senses; it was identified 65 times in the sample of 100 analysed concordances. Refer to Examples (1) in which *please* is used in Sense 1:

(1) a. m-S0340:[1]   can I have some salt please? (Spoken BNC2014: SKEQ)
      b. m-S0600:   –ANONnameF[2] will you just snag me a Stella out of the
                       cupboard please (,) love? (Spoken BNC2014: SAZX)
      c. f-S0654:   finished please can I get down[?] (Spoken BNC2014: SNCR)
      d. m-S0416:   may I please leave the table? (Spoken BNC2014: SBCL)

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1 S0340 is this speaker's identification in the Spoken BNC2014, f/m indicates the gender of the speaker.

2 ANONnameF/M is used in the Spoken BNC2014 to censor the names in the transcripts.
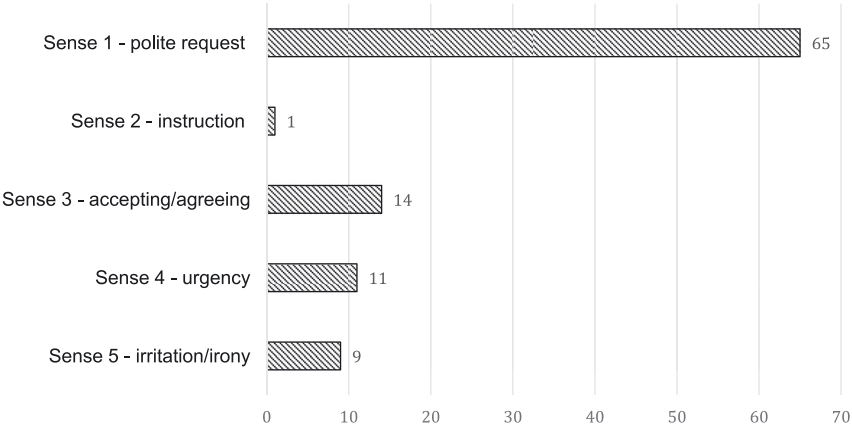
Figure 1: Distribution of senses of *please*.

Here, *please* is used when the speaker makes a request, as in Examples (1a) and (1b), or asks for permission to do something, as in (1c) and (1d). In these examples *please* is used to underscore the friendly respectful nature of the request. The first known use of *please* as a stand-alone politeness marker dates back to 1771; it is believed to have evolved from the phrases *if you please* and *if it be your will* or *pleasure* (Culpeper and Gillings 2018: 40; Murphy and De Felice 2019: 91). Sense 1 has its origin in these expressions. *Please* became common in requests in the 19th century (Akimoto 2000). It is also often referred to as a "downtoner" that can be used to soften utterances (Culpeper and Gillings 2018: 40). We define Sense 1 as the expression of politeness that is engendered by conveying a friendly acknowledgement of the anticipated cooperation between speakers. The notion of anticipated cooperation is essential for Sense 1 as the speaker expects the addressee to respond positively to their request. In terms of syntax, when a request is formulated as a question, *please* often occurs clause-finally, as is the case in (1a) and (1b). There are also instances in which *please* occurs clause-initially or clause-medially, as is the case in (1c) and (1d). Adding *please* to a request is part of a ritual frame: speakers' fixed expectations and their perceptions of social roles are involved in such standard situations (Kádár and House 2021: 81–82). It is assumed that speakers know what is expected of them and will generally tend to act according to these expectations. This is exemplified in (2) by an interaction between two friends:

(2)   f-S0024:   just you?
        m-S0144:   yep (.) can I have a cup of tea please?
        f-S0024:   yeah (.) (Spoken BNC2014: SCZV)

In Example (2), two speakers engage in a simple, everyday conversation. The question formulated with the help of the modal verb *can* is another example of a politeness strategy. Requesting something by using modal verbs such as *can/could* or *would* makes the question a conventionally indirect speech act (Márquez-Reiter 2000: 42–43). The instruction to make a cup of tea is thus understood automatically. The addition of *please* is an instance of acknowledging one's gratitude for the service that is to be rendered. We identify this sense as anticipatory or routine politeness, as Murphy and De Felice (2019: 78) refer to it.

We identify Sense 2 as politely giving instructions. Instructions are generally realised with direct imperatives (Márquez-Reiter 2000: 36), which is why they are seen as more formal and were infrequent in the analyzed spoken data. In the sample of 100 concordances, please occurred only once in such a construction, as seen in (3):

(3)   f-S0441:   please help yourself to spinach if you'd like some
        f-S0439:   thanks […] (Spoken BNC2014: S2AJ)

The anticipatory function of *please* in instructions appears to play a different role in constructing the meaning of the utterance. In its clause-initial position, *please* indicates that the instruction that follows is treated by the speaker as an invitation, and that the speaker is not issuing an order. In such contexts, *please* as a "softener" shifts the emphasis towards the anticipated pleasure that will be derived from having the addressee follow the instruction.

Anticipatory politeness is not only part of requests and instructions; it also appears to be the main motivation for the use of *please* in Sense 3. In the sample of 100 concordances, *please* was used 14 times in the contexts in question, with speakers either accepting or agreeing to something. Refer to Examples (4a) and (4b):

(4)   a.   f-S0329:   would you like a bit of ice cream on top of that?
           m-S0326:   alright then (.) yes please (Spoken BNC2014, S6JP)
      b.   f-S0302:   Do you want a glass of water?
           f-S0262:   yes please yeah (Spoken BNC2014: SA69)

Accepting something by simply saying yes and omitting please could be interpreted as impolite in British English. The use of *please* expresses a sense of gratitude for the service to be rendered, which in turn makes the answer sound polite.

Senses 4 and 5, which stand in contrast to the other three senses identified, were identified 11 and 9 times in the sample, respectively. Sense 4 can be defined as expressing urgency in situations in which *please* is used to emphasise the need for help. Sense 4 is related to Sense 1 (requests), as the utterances resemble requests, but the context usually helps us understand that *please* is not used to express politeness. In (5a), a woman asks someone to take care of the soup that has gone bad, while in

(5b) the speaker pleads with her friends not to make her get naked, while playing a classic party game Truth or Dare:

(5) a. f-S0478:   it's horrible can you chuck it? ah it's horrid […] at least can it? oh please can you deal with it? (Spoken BNC2014: SWNB)
     b. f-S0202:   I don't wear I'm not wearing a bra so please don't make me get naked (Spoken BNC2014: SJTU)

The speakers in (5a) and (5b) expect the addressees to cooperate and help them resolve the problem at hand or not to embarrass them. In such contexts, the addition of *please* emphasises the urgency of the request, but makes the utterance sound less abrupt by also pointing out the value that the speaker attaches to the help they anticipate receiving from addressees.

In Sense 5, *please* is used either to express the speaker's irritation or to show that they are talking to the addressee in an ironic way. In these contexts, *please* is typically used if the speaker either does not want to believe something or wants to express their irritation. This is exemplified in (6), which depicts a conversation between two friends discussing a TV show, with one of the speakers expressing surprise at finding out about their friend's interest in a dance show. The speaker is surprised by her friend's interest in the TV show in question, although the addressee immediately disputes the speaker's assertion:

(6) f-S0439:   please don't say you watch Strictly Come Dancing
     f-S0444:   oh gosh no (Spoken BNC2014: SVPK).

The collocation analysis has shown that in Senses 4 and 5 *please* often occurs with *don't*, thus forming a construction *please don't* + verb, which occurs 157 times in the entire Spoken BNC2014. We have established that in this construction, *please* may perform one of two functions. If the speaker is intent on preventing an action of some kind, *please* helps convey a sense of urgency; the speaker is calling for urgent assistance because the situation is perceived to be quite serious, which is clear from the context (Sense 4). If the speaker demonstrates annoyance with something, *please* can be used to add a tone of irony to the utterance (Sense 5). Table 3 provides ten randomised concordances showing how these two senses are manifested in such contexts: lines 1–6 illustrate Sense 4; lines 7–10 demonstrate the use of *please* in Sense 5.

Example (7) illustrates an ironic use of *please don't*: here, two friends are talking about Rhianna and Beyoncé and which of the two they think looks more "buff". One of the speakers does not receive the answer she had hoped to, and the following exchange ensues:

Table 3: Randomised concordances containing *please don't*.

1.	f-S0167: oh my goodness mum		
	f-S0104:	please don't	tell dad cos he knows nothing about this
2.	f-S0190: we get carpet really cheapso look	please don't	worry about them […]
3.	m-S0073: I don't wanna go back to it (.)	please don't	repeat it (.) okay cool (.) thanks […]
4.	m-S0278: […] if you're gonna make a comment	please don't	make it on trip advisor
5.	f-S0324: oh just	please don't	laugh at me when I get them wrong oh my god
6.	f-S0329: […] oh no	please don't	get in front of me I can't bear it
7.	f-S044: yes f-S0439	please don't	say you watch Strictly Come Dancing
8.	f-S0058: nice m-S0179:	please don't	tell me you're turning into –ANONnameF
9.	f-S0050: what have you got there? What is it?	please don't	tell me that's a mobile phone
10.	f-S0202:	please don't	be a dick and fucking work

(7)   f-S0556:   I said who's buffer I didn't ask whose body was [better]

m-S0405:   I'm sorry I'm sorry please don't kill me

f-S0556:   alright I'm gonna let that one slide but don't come up here thinking you can ice skate (Spoken BNC2014: SNCP)

This entire exchange seems to be humorous and both parties appear not to take it seriously. However, the irony inherent in the utterance only becomes clear through access to the broader conversational context; reading the utterance by speaker m-S0405 in isolation could lead to its being interpreted as sincere. Example (8) provides another context, in which the speaker is clearly irritated; a woman discussing the way dead bodies are shown on Spanish TV without any warning. The use of *please* emphasises her strong feelings and how distraught she is:

(8)   f-S0492:   it just comes up (.) it's just there and you're like (.) a bit of heads up please (Spoken BNC2014: S78P).

To conclude the analysis in this section, a close reading of 100 concordances containing *please* shows that it is primarily used in order to express politeness; least frequent is the use of *please* in an ironic sense or in order to express irritation. In the latter contexts, the ironic effect is generated by the contrast between the nature of the situation and the positive expressive potential of *please* in its other senses. The meaning of *please* becomes inverted and communicates the

speaker's unwillingness to further engage in discussing the topic (see Table 3, which contains the construction *please don't* + verb). The inverted sense of *please* occurs in situations where the speaker is confronted with something they deem to be absurd or unacceptable.

4.2 Analysis of *thank you* and *thanks*

A further analysis of 200 concordances containing *thank you* and *thanks* has identified four distinct senses of these words in the Spoken BNC2014. *Thank you* and *thanks* are used in the following contexts (the operational criteria for defining each of these senses are discussed below Figures 2 and 3):

    Sense 1: expressing gratitude,
    Sense 2: declining something,
    Sense 3: accepting something,
    Sense 4: expressing irritation or irony.

While Sense 1 (expression of gratitude) is the most frequent sense for both markers, there are some differences in the frequencies of the other senses that are discussed further below. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the distribution of the identified senses of *thank you* and *thanks*, respectively, within the randomised sample of 100 concordances extracted from the Spoken BNC2014.
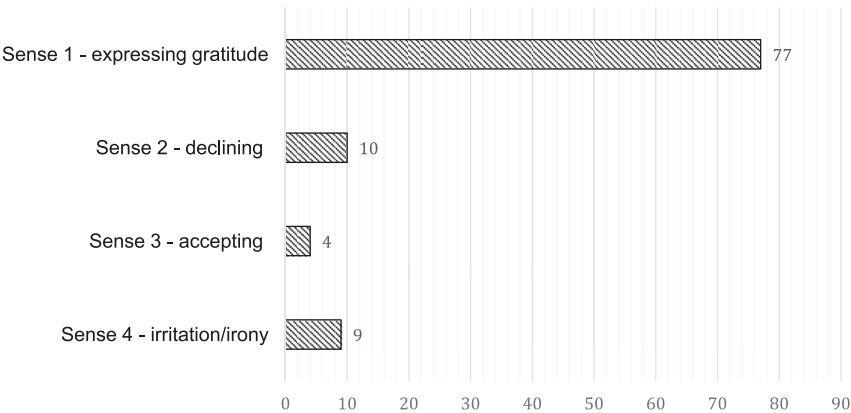

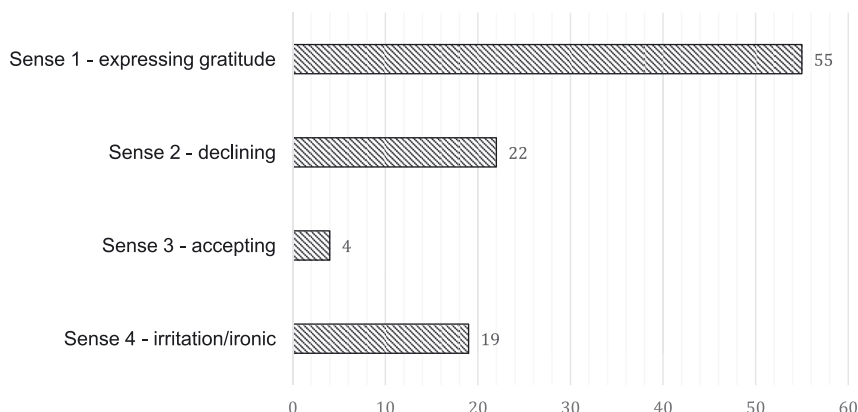**Figure 2:** Distribution of senses of *thank you*.

Figure 3: Distribution of senses of *thanks*.

Gratitude and politeness are closely related; expressing gratitude is an essential component of showing politeness (Percival and Pulford 2020: 229). Examples (9) illustrate how *thank you* is used in Sense 1:

(9)   a.   f-S0104:   […] right can you do it for me while I'm having a shower?
        f-S0167:   yes mother
        f-S0104:   thank you (Spoken BNC: S79Y)
    b.   f-S0198:   I haven't read the card yet thank you thank you for the card
          (Spoken BNC2014: SL9V)
    c.   f-S0329:   you've got shoes on so can you take that out? and also the one
          that's on the doorstep? tie it up (.) thank you very much (…) put
          it on there. (Spoken BNC2014: SPFN)
    d.   f-S0417:   thank you very much for this pasta –ANONnameF
        f-S0411:   you're very welcome you're not expected to eat all of that
          (Spoken BNC2014: STA2)

The use of *thank you* in (9) expresses acknowledgement of a service performed by another person. Sense 1 has been identified in 77 contexts for *thank you* and 55 times for *thanks*. This difference in frequency could be explained by the fact that *thanks* is less emphatic; there is less emphasis on a person's cooperation, as the focus shifts to the expression of content and satisfaction, which is illustrated by Examples (10):

(10)   a.   f-S0328:   oh thanks for that meal by the way it was very nice (Spoken
            BNC2014: SKHW)

    b.   f-S0264:   could you just pass me my phone? it's next to you – thanks (.)
                     (Spoken BNC2014: S2W4)
    c.   UNKFEMALE:[3]   […] did you enjoy it?
         f-S0439:   it was really good thanks (Spoken BNC2014: SZQX)

In Examples (9) and (10), the speakers are grateful for having received help, a birthday card, a meal, and so forth. The use of *thank you* places the emphasis on the actions of the addressee(s) and their involvement in the fulfilment of the speaker's request. Although *thanks* likewise expresses gratitude, the pronoun *you* in *thank you* functions as a means of amplifying the appreciation, which makes the utterance more emphatic. This functions similarly in German with *danke* and *danke dir*. In both English and German, the addition of the personal pronoun makes the addressee the centre of attention. In English, this emphasis can be further intensified by adding *very much* – see Examples (9c) and (9d). *Thank you* also occurs more frequently with *very much* than *thanks* does. Out of the 3,736 occurrences of *thank you* in the corpus, 367 (10%) of them collocate with *very much*, making *very much* a salient collocate of *thank you*. In contrast, only 62 (4%) of the 1,267 occurrences of *thanks* collocate with *very much*, which also supports the hypothesis that *thank you* expresses a higher degree of gratitude than *thanks*. Table 4 lists randomised concordances containing the collocation *thank you very much*. Importantly, *thank you*

Table 4: Randomised concordances containing *thank you very much*.

1.	f-S0021: awesome (.) that is amazing	thank you very much	(.) that is awesome
2.	f-S0338: >>oh good	thank you very much	that's kind of you (.)
3.	m-S0392: yeah (.) anything that you want doing		
	f-S0390:	thank you very much	that's very generous of you
4.	m-S0652: mm	thank you very much	that was delicious
5.	f-S0634: >>–ANONnameM that was delicious	thank you very much	m-S0637: thank you
6.	f-S0316: […] I've had a lovely evening		
	f-S0255: it has been really nice	thank you very much	for coming
7.	f-S0486: oh lovely	thank you very much	(.) that's great (.)
8.	m-S0144: no (.) let's go back the same way we came (.)	thank you very much	(.) I'm not going to try one of your alternative routes (.)
9.	m-S0046: […] why should you still be in bed eh?		
	f-S0041: Cos I've worked a six-day week	thank you very much	m-S0046: hang on (.)
10.	m-S0655: yeah you're a Homo sapien		
	f-S0653: I'm a human being	thank you very much	m-S0655: a Homo sapien

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3 These are unknown speakers who were not classified according to the social variables in the Spoken BNC2014. UNKFEMALE stands for unknown female speaker.

very much is also used to show irritation or irony (see lines 8–10 in Table 4), which is discussed below in relation to Sense 4.

In terms of syntactic function, when expressing gratitude, *thank you* and *thanks* can occur clause-initially or clause-finally, and they can also stand alone. If *thank you* or *thanks* appears at the beginning of the utterance, the word will generally be followed by what the speaker is grateful for; see Examples (9b), (9d) and (10a). In these cases, the speaker shows gratitude of their own accord and expresses what it is that they are grateful for. In contrast, if the politeness markers occur clause-finally or stand alone, the function it performs is more often than not to answer a question or to thank someone for complying with a request; see Examples (9a), (9c), (10b) and (10c).

Sense 2 was identified 10 times for *thank you* and 22 times for *thanks*. In this sense, these words are used as a means of politely declining something. The politeness strategy is often used as a facework strategy in order not to hurt the feelings of the speaker who is making the offer (Floyd and Ray 2016: 1296). Interestingly, this sense is more frequent for *thanks* within the analysed sample:

(11) a. m-S0493:   Does anyone want a drink? […]
            f-S0492:   alright for the minute thanks (Spoken BNC2014: SWGV)
      b. f-S0330:   does anyone wanna put anything in here?
            m-S0331:   no I'm alright thanks (Spoken BNC2014: STWC)
      c. f-S0397:   did you want a drink?
            m-S0392:   no thanks […] (Spoken BNC2014: SC2T)

(12) a. f-S0653:   Do you want anything else to eat for for your breakfast?
                        some apple?
            m-S0655:   no thank you (Spoken BNC2014: S9UA)
      b. f-S0588:   oh can I have a tea please? English tea
            UNKMALE: English tea yeah do you take sugar?
            f-S0588:   er no thank you thank you (Spoken BNC2014: SW4Z)

In these contexts, the speaker recognises the offer, although it is not needed and is thus declined. Declining something by simply saying *no* and omitting the *thanks* or *thank you* could be considered impolite in English. Adding *thanks* or *thank you* signals that the offer is still appreciated, while the speaker is fully satisfied with the situation. Another collocate that deserves our attention is *alright*, which often functions either as a substitute or support for *no* in instances where an offer is declined – see Examples (11a) and (11b). *Alright* collocates more frequently with *thanks* than *thank you*; the rejection of the offer appears to be mutually understood by all participants. In this case, the use of *thanks/thank you* is part of a ritual frame, where the meaning is automatically understood by the speakers involved.

Sense 3 is closely related to Sense 2: an addressee can either decline or accept an offer by saying *thanks* or *thank you*. Examples (13) and (14) illustrate how *thank you* and *thanks* are used in Sense 3:

(13)   a.   f-S0058:   help yourself to cakes and sweets and things
            m-S0470:   thank you can I take one for later? (Spoken BNC2014: SGSK)
      b.   UNKFEMALE: are you done with this, yeah? shall I take this?
            m-S0367:   yeah thank you […] (Spoken BNC2014: SRZT)

(14)   a.   f-S0441:   please help yourself to spinach if you'd like some
            f-S0439:   thanks […] (Spoken BNC2014: S2AJ)
      b.   f-S0381:   […] okay so do you want some pudding? rhubarb and custard
            m-S0326:   sure (.) thanks (Spoken BNC2014: SNQD)

In these cases, the speakers accept the offer or agree to something. Similar to Sense 2, Sense 3 could arguably be seen as an expression of gratitude and therefore as related to Sense 1. Nevertheless, no real action precedes the expression of gratitude, and the *thanks* is issued for the offer rather than for the action. In these contexts, they are usually uttered in response to a question or offer, syntactically both *thank you* and *thanks* either stand on their own or occur clause-finally, after the question has been answered. Once again, these authentic contexts reinforce our hypothesis that *thank you* is more emphatic and shows a higher degree of appreciation, while *thanks* is used in a more nonchalant way, as shown in (14a) and (14b).

     Senses 1–3 express gratitude in one way or another. In contrast, Sense 4 expresses irritation or irony, occurring 19 times for *thanks* and 9 times for *thank you*. *Thanks* and *thank you* are often used as a response to an insult or joke:

(15)   a.   f-S0167:   well you have because you're not obsessively clean
            f-S0104:   oh thank you
            f-S0167:   no it's a good thing (Spoken BNC2014: SAB7)
      b.   f-S0653:   I'm going to be a sleeping animal and I'm not I'm not an
                           animal anyway
            f-S0654:   you are
            m-S0655:   yeah you're a Homo sapien
            f-S0653:   I'm a human being thank you very much (Spoken BNC2014: SDQ8)

(16)   a.   m-S0214:   I saw one of the brothers got killed in the Vampire Diaries
            f-S0211:   they constantly get killed –UNCLEARWORD killed
            f-S0202:   thanks for that (Spoken BNC2014: SKB5)
      b.   f-S0325:   I promise that's you I talk to one girl and one other girl but
                           she's way out of my league so I'm talking to you right now
            f-S0324:   right thanks (Spoken BNC2014: S5QR)

Examples (15) and (16) show how the use of *thank you* and *thanks* allows the speaker to express disagreement with the previous utterance in a non-confrontational manner. In such contexts, the rejection of the validity of the previous utterance is caused by its offensive character, as it may imply that the speaker fails to correspond to some generally established social norm. In (15a), the choice of language by the first speaker implies that the other person is slovenly. In (15b), the offence is provoked by the abrupt repetition by the two other speakers of the point that f-S0653 clearly intends as a mild, self-deprecating joke that elicits disagreement on the part of her interlocutors. In (16a) the speaker conveys a sense of annoyance to what she takes to be a spoiler. In (16b) *thanks* is used to point out the offensive nature of the comparison of the speaker to other girls in the previous utterance.

As Sense 1 and Table 4 have shown, *thank you very much* is primarily used to express gratitude; however, this collocation can also be used in an ironic way as a means of showing the degree to which a speaker disagrees, as exemplified in (15b). Similarly, the reaction illustrated in (16a), in which the speaker is annoyed about a spoiler for a TV show, is used as an expression of irritation. Within the sample of 200 concordances, the politeness marker *thanks* is used twice as frequently as *thank you* in a subverted (ironic) way. This trend could likewise be further confirmation of the hypothesis that *thank you* expresses a higher degree of gratitude than *thanks*.

To conclude the analysis in this section, the examination of 200 contexts containing *thank you* and *thanks* indicates that in most cases, both words are used to express gratitude, either for some form of assistance, or for any kind of offer (Senses 1–3). There are also contexts in which the semantic core of these words is inverted in order to express irritation, or to respond to a joke or insult. Similar to the inverted Sense 5 of *please*, the effect of ironic protestation against what has been said is created by the speaker's desire to highlight the incompatibility of the offensive nature of what has been said and the positive core of the meaning of *thanks/thank you*. Importantly, *thank you* is used more frequently when it comes to expressing gratitude, as well as in collocation with *very much*. Generally, *thanks* appears to be more casual than *thank you*, as it lacks the direct appeal to the addressee in the form of the personal pronoun *you*; *thanks* is also used in a subverted (ironic) way more frequently.

4.3 Analysis of *sorry*

This section provides a detailed analysis of *sorry*. A close reading of 100 concordances containing *sorry* has identified five distinct senses of this word. *Sorry* as a discourse marker can be used in the following contexts:
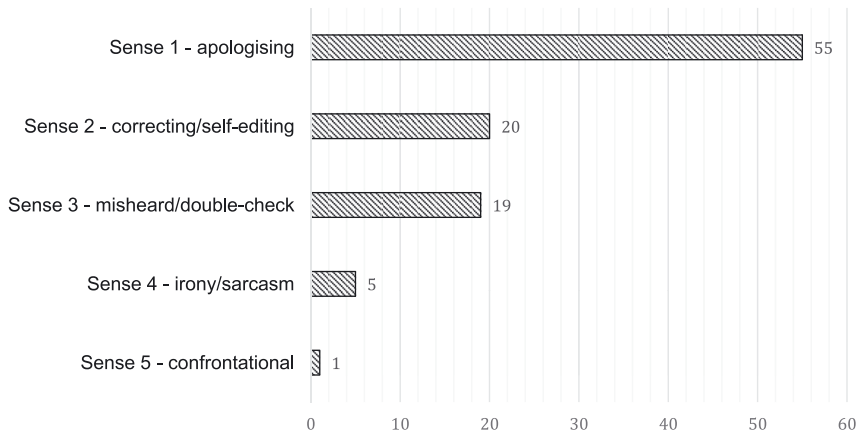
Figure 4: Distribution of senses of *sorry*.

Sense 1: apologising,
Sense 2: correcting or self-editing,
Sense 3: double-checking what the interlocutor has just said,
Sense 4: expressing irony or sarcasm,
Sense 5: being confrontational.

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of the identified senses in the randomised sample of 100 concordances extracted from the Spoken BNC2014.

Expressing apology or regret constitutes Sense 1 of *sorry*, which has been identified 55 times in the analysed sample. Examples (17) provide the typical contexts in which *sorry* is used in Sense 1:

(17)　a.　f-S0282:　　ha-
　　　　　m-S0651:　　with the trustees (.) […]
　　　　　m-S0651:　　sorry I stopped you you were gonna say something
　　　　　f-S0282:　　no no no no that's fine erm (.) […] (Spoken BNC2014: SY5K)
　　　b.　f-S0282:　　just pretend that nothing's going on
　　　　　f-S0293:　　but I can't when you're p- putting your little pen down it's
　　　　　　　　　　　horrid
　　　　　f-S0282:　　sorry (Spoken BNC2014: SRD5)
　　　c.　m-S0605:　　two shall I leave that or?
　　　　　m-S0493:　　I'd leave that you could go directly to
　　　　　m-S0604:　　to three […]
　　　　　m-S0605:　　oh okay sorry three now do you want me to try (Spoken
　　　　　　　　　　　BNC2014: SR3K)

In (17a), the speaker apologises for interrupting, and in (17c), the speaker apologises for misunderstanding the rules of a board game. In contrast to a request, an apology is generally uttered after an event or action has taken place and typically expresses respect rather than friendliness, with the speaker showing regret for what they have done (Márquez-Reiter 2000: 44). In terms of syntax, *sorry* typically occurs on its own or clause-initially, at the beginning of the apology. In general, the concordance analysis shows that the speakers employ *sorry* in a relatively casual way to convey an empathetic response to the negative reaction of the previous speaker.

Sense 2 was identified 20 times in the sample. *Sorry* is used in this sense by a speaker in order to correct their own mistake. Syntactically, the use of *sorry* in this sense is markedly different from the contexts typical of Sense 1. In this sense *sorry* occurs as an interruption within the utterance and is followed by the phrase correcting what has just been said before the use of *sorry*. We propose that it be called "self-editing":

(18) a. m-S0456:   is it in profiles? must be
          f-S0474:   no (.) you I thought you just had it go back up to display
                     settings er sorry down sorry (Spoken BNC2014: S6BR)
      b. f-S0530:   he said he said this morning no sorry he said on Friday you
                     remember he said I'm in India the banks shut on Monday
          f-S0529:   until Monday that was right yeah I thought that was Sunday
                     but that seems to have gone now (Spoken BNC2014: S954)

In Examples (18), Sense 2 has a similar function to the apologetic Sense 1. However, the contextual situation is different: the speakers do not really ask for forgiveness, they use *sorry* as a means of correcting themselves. In Example (18a), the speaker explains the settings on a phone, but confuses the directions up and down. First, she uses *sorry* to correct herself, while the second *sorry* is used to apologise to the addressee. *Sorry* is uttered casually and is included in the conversation without the addressee necessarily recognising it as an apology. In Example (18b), the addressee does not even react to *sorry* and instead continues with the conversation. *Sorry* in Sense 2 usually occurs in clause-medial position, after the mistake.

Sense 3 occurs 19 times in the sample of 100 concordances and is employed when something is unclear or has been misheard. Examples (19) provide the typical contexts in which *sorry* is used in Sense 3:

(19) a. m-S0513:   they've gotten off lightly haven't they?
          f-S0511:   sorry?
          m-S0513:   they've gotten off lightly haven't they? (Spoken BNC2014:
                     SEFQ)

  b.   m-S0686:   […] I think he's a you know he's a good politician he's sort of
                   a good one
       f-S0684:   he'll make a good mayor then
       m-S0686:   sorry?
       f-S0684:   he'll make a good mayor (Spoken BNC2014: SVLZ)
  c.   f-S0058:   […] you're not parking that in the multi-storey is he?
       m-S0179:   sorry?
       f-S0058:   not parking that in the multi-storey is he? (Spoken BNC2014:
                   S2GS)

By using *sorry* in this sense, the speakers in Example (19) are apologising for not immediately understanding the utterance made by their interlocutor. In this case, *sorry* is not used in order to sincerely apologise, but rather to signalise to the speaker that their last utterance was not understood properly. *Sorry* is used as a one-word question and the response consists in the repetition of the end of the previous utterance. Contrary to Senses 1 and 2, *sorry* is used here in the form of a question, which allows the speaker to convey their request for repetition as a simultaneous correction of their own mistake, which considerably softens the impact of the interruption.

Similar to *please* and *thank you/thanks*, *sorry* can also be used in a subverted (ironic/sarcastic) way. Sense 4 was identified five times in the sample of 100 contexts. Example (20) is a conversation between two sisters:

(20)   f-S0621:   >>–UNCLEARWORD you c- that's only available if you have
                    your nails painted
        f-S0567:   oh sorry not part of that club (Spoken BNC2014: SJKD)

It is only in the expanded concordances that it becomes clear that the addressee employs *sorry* as a means of making a humorous and slightly scathing remark about people who paint their nails. Another example that shows the importance of an extended context for identifying irony is Example (21), in which two speakers discuss another person's age; one of the speakers jokes about him being a big boy after previously suggesting he had been a little boy (a wee lad) at the time. The utterance looks like she is correcting herself and is thus closely related to Sense 2 (self-editing). Unlike in the examples representing Sense 2 proper, the use of phrases *a wee lad* and *a big boy*, which are rich in evaluative content, indicate that there is definitely more than just self-editing at play here. A closer look at the wider context allows us to identify irony. The empathetic nature of *sorry* in its other senses allows the speaker to convey disagreement in an ironic way when the context clearly indicates that what has been said is unacceptable to the speaker:

(21)   m-S0476:   and it was still pouring with rain (.) everything was like
                    –ANONnameM who is now fifty-six? (.) he was then (…)
        f-S0475:   a wee lad
        m-S0476:   >>er I think he was about –ANONnameM 's age yeah
        f-S0475:   oh sorry a big boy (Spoken BNC2014: SBB2)

Finally, Sense 5 was found only once in the sample of 100 concordances, and it is used in a confrontational way. Sense 5 is related to Sense 3 (using *sorry* to double-check) something that was misunderstood. Example (22) is a conversation between a mother and her daughter at dinner:

(22)   f-S0653:   –ANONnameF are you actually going to attempt to cut your
                    chicken up? (.) could you do that?
        f-S0654:   can you?
        f-S0653:   sorry? no cos you're seven and a half nearly so it's really time
                    to (.) attempt it how do you cut things up at school for school
                    dinners? (Spoken BNC2014: SVZE)

By using *sorry* as a question, the speaker gives the impression that she did not understand her daughter's request. Syntactically, *sorry* is used on its own, similar to Sense 3. Thanks to the expanded dialogue, it is obvious that *sorry* is not employed here as a means of expressing genuine misunderstanding, but rather to point out the inappropriateness of the daughter's request. By saying *sorry*, the mother challenges her daughter's request and goes on to suggest that her daughter try to cut up her chicken herself. *Sorry* is not used here in order to apologise, but rather to show disagreement and even irritation. Again, intonation and stress patterns are essential for identifying the subverted use of politeness markers. The use of *sorry* as a sign of rejection and irritation is, however, provided by the broader context: the speaker uses an abrupt *no* after *sorry*, which is followed by a telling off.

In sum, the corpus-based analysis of the discourse marker *sorry* illustrates its versatility. The interrelated Senses 1–3 (expressing apology, self-editing and double-checking) could be identified as polite as they all utilise *sorry* to apologise by stressing the empathetic and respectful response to the addressee's negative feelings within the given situation. Senses 4 and 5 (expressing irony and being confrontational) subvert the positive core of the apologetic meaning of *sorry*.

5 Conclusion and further research

The analysis of 400 concordances extracted from the Spoken BNC2014 has shown that *please*, *thank you*, *thanks* and *sorry* are used most frequently in their core senses,

namely making a request, expressing gratitude, and apologising. All of these markers reveal the same nature of sense variability: in addition to their core senses, we have identified two extensions with more specific functional uses related to the expressive potential of the core sense (Senses 2 and 3) and the contexts in which these words are used to subvert the notion of politeness in order to convey irony or a strong sense of disagreement (Senses 4 and 5).

The analysis of the selected politeness markers demonstrates that polysemy is an important feature of these lexical units. Their polysemic structure has opened up insights into the multifaceted nature of politeness in spoken English. We have identified the specific functions these markers perform in each type of the context, which has enabled us to provide definitions for each of the senses of these markers given at the beginning of Sections 4.1–4.3. The analysis has shown that in some contexts, the positive core meaning of each politeness marker can be subverted so that the word is used in an ironic way. The irony is present for all four politeness markers, but the majority of occurrences were identified for *thanks*. In such contexts, politeness markers are able to soften the abruptness of rejection or disagreement and make utterances seem less confrontational by employing irony. Our breakdown of the senses for each of these markers opens up potential for improving dictionary entries for these units as politeness markers. We have demonstrated the mechanisms that allow these words to be used in instances where the speaker wishes to convey disagreement and irritation in an ironic way.

Certain limitations of the study should be addressed here. First, the sample of 100 concordances is relatively small in comparison to the total number of occurrences of each word selected for the analysis, which means that some rare contextual situations may have been overlooked. Nonetheless, we consider the results of our analysis to be reliable and valuable as they demonstrate the consistency and hierarchical structure of the senses within each of the markers, depending on the authentic contexts in which they occur. Second, information regarding intonation and stress patterns would have been beneficial, especially in the cases of ironic and confrontational uses. Finally, since English spoken in England (83.9%) is overrepresented in the Spoken BNC2014, it could be argued that the findings reflect the use of politeness markers by speakers from contemporary England rather than Britain as a whole.

The Spoken BNC 2014 is undoubtedly a valuable source information pertaining to present-day informal English, and this data should be used extensively for further studies. First, the corpus contains information on the gender, age, socio-economic status and regional dialect of the speakers, which is extremely valuable for any sociolinguistic analysis. Second, the findings of our study could be complemented by adding the analysis of different politeness markers and other politeness strategies. Finally, the findings of this study could be compared with the uses of politeness markers in other varieties of English.

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Bionotes

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