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"Yeeees, Thank You Please!": the Pragmatics of *Please* in African Englishes

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Abstract

This article examines the discourse-pragmatic use of *please* as a marker of politeness in three African English varieties: Ghanaian English, Nigerian English, and Ugandan English, analysing its frequency, structural patterns, pragmatic functions, and variation across different text types. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study analysed data from the Ghanaian, Nigerian, and Ugandan components of the International Corpus of English. The findings show that *please* occurs most frequently in Nigerian English, followed by Ghanaian English and Ugandan English, and that it is most common in correspondences and public dialogues across all three varieties. Also,

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please occurs predominantly in clause-initial position and fulfils a range of pragmatic functions, including those that have not been documented in studies of other world Englishes. Overall, these findings reflect the impact of local languages and cultures on the use of *please* in the three African English varieties.

Keywords

International Corpus of English – Ghanaian English – Nigerian English – Ugandan English – variational pragmatics – *please*

1 Introduction

In his influential model of the Concentric Circles of English (Kachru, 1985: 17), Kachru delineates three distinct categories: the Inner Circle (IC), the Outer Circle (OC), and the Expanding Circle (EC). The IC encompasses norm-providing varieties of English, spoken as a native language by the majority of the population in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. The OC comprises norm-developing varieties, where English functions predominantly as a second language and localised norms are emerging in response to specific sociolinguistic conditions in countries such as Ghana and India. The EC includes norm-dependent varieties, in which English is primarily learned as a foreign language, typically modelled on IC standards, and used chiefly for international communication in countries such as China and Germany. While the model is frequently applied to describe the global distribution of English in terms of geography or speaker population, it also offers a valuable framework for understanding pragmatic variation across English varieties. In IC contexts, pragmatic norms – such as those governing requests, apologies, and politeness markers – are grounded in native sociocultural conventions. In OC varieties, such norms are shaped by local cultural values and communicative traditions. By contrast, EC varieties often follow taught pragmatic norms based on IC standards, though these may be subject to varying degrees of transfer from learners' first languages.

Among politeness markers, *please* has been one of the most salient and extensively studied in IC Englishes, most notably in British English (BrE; Wichmann, 2004; Islentyeva et al., 2023), American English (AmE; Murphy, 2025), and New Zealand English (NZE; Sato, 2008). Research into *please* in EC contexts has been comparatively limited, though some studies have

investigated its use in the English of Arabic and Hebrew native speakers (Shafran, 2019). In contrast, studies of *please* in OC English varieties remain particularly scarce. Where such research exists, it is often subsumed within broader analyses of requests and politeness strategies. Examples include Adegbija's (1989) work on Nigerian English (NigE), Lwanga-Lumu's (2002) study of Ugandan English (UgE), and Anderson's (2009) examination of Ghanaian English (GhE). Methodologically, these studies employ diverse approaches, such as observational data and interviews (Adegbija, 1989; Anderson, 2009), as well as discourse completion tasks (DCTs) (Lwanga-Lumu, 2002; Anderson, 2009). While DCTs offer valuable insights by eliciting speech acts in controlled conditions (e.g. specifying social roles, relationships, and scenario details), they do not capture the authentic use of *please* as it occurs naturally in diverse communicative contexts. For example, Flöck and Geluykens (2015) note that DCTs often produce overly indirect, highly mitigated speech that does not fully match natural usage, and recommend combining elicited and naturalistic approaches to obtain rich, contextually grounded yet comprehensive pragmatic analyses. In addition, existing studies do not comprehensively analyse *please* across a range of spoken and written text types, such as parliamentary debates, broadcast discussions, and novels. They also pay limited attention to its structural realisations and different pragmatic functions. As a result, these studies provide only a partial account of the use of *please* in African English (AfE) varieties. To address this gap, the present study undertakes a systematic exploration of pragmatic variation in the use of *please* in three AfE varieties: GhE, NigE, and UgE – considering its structure, pragmatic functions, and frequency across different text types. This paper pursues the following objectives:

(a) to investigate the frequency and structural realisations of *please* as a DPF across GhE, NigE, and UgE;
(b) to describe the pragmatic functions of *please* across the three varieties; and
(c) to explore variation in the use of *please* across diverse text types in these three AfE varieties.

By exploring these aspects, this study seeks to advance our understanding of nativisation processes in AfE, particularly with respect to politeness markers.

The remaining sections of the paper are structured as follows: Section 2 provides a brief background on the varieties of English studied in this paper, while Section 3 discusses the theoretical framework and reviews prior research on *please*. Section 4 outlines the methodology employed, whilst Section 5 presents the results of the analysis. Section 6 offers a broader discussion of the findings, and Section 7 provides the conclusion.

2 English in Ghana, Nigeria, and Uganda

English was introduced to Nigeria and Ghana around the 16th century and to Uganda in the 19th century through (slave) trade and colonisation (Ssempuuma, 2012: 475; Gut, 2017: 492). Today, English co-exists with about 73 indigenous languages in Ghana (e.g. Akan, Ewe and Ga), 520 in Nigeria (e.g. Ibibio, Igbo and Tiv), and 41 in Uganda (e.g. Ateso, Luganda and Rutooro) (Eberhard et al., 2025). The interaction of English with these indigenous languages, coupled with broader socio-historical factors (Wolf, 2021: 217–218), has resulted in distinct national varieties, such as GhE, NigE, and UgE. English is the official language in Ghana and Nigeria, and a co-official language in Uganda. In these countries, English functions in key domains, such as law, media, education, commerce, and public administration (Gut, 2017: 495; Namyalo et al., 2016: 20). Although English is a second language for the majority of speakers, it is increasingly becoming a first language (L1) for a rising population of young people in urban areas (Huber, 2004; Isingoma and Meierkord, 2016; Jowitt, 2019). Applying Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model for postcolonial English varieties, previous research has shown that these three AfE varieties have undergone processes of nativisation (Adokorach and Isingoma, 2022; Collins, 2022), with NigE showing signs of progression toward endonormative stabilisation (Collins, 2022).

Several studies have investigated the phonological (e.g. Huber, 2008; Adokorach and Isingoma, 2020; Akinola and Oladipupo, 2022), lexico-semantic (e.g. Isingoma, 2016a; Callies, 2017; Brato, 2019), and syntactic (e.g. Isingoma, 2016b; Brato, 2020; Olatoye, 2023) features of these three varieties. Pragmatic research, however, remains uneven across these varieties. While there is a growing number of pragmatic studies on NigE (e.g. Honkanen, 2022; Westphal, 2023; Unuabonah and Daniel, 2025), there is relatively limited research on the pragmatic features of GhE and UgE. Existing pragmatic studies on these two varieties have largely focused on politeness (e.g. Anderson, 2009; Isingoma, 2021), pragmatic markers (e.g. Meierkord and Isingoma, 2021; Unuabonah and Anderson, 2023), and speech acts (e.g. Anchimbe, 2018; Meierkord, 2023). Some of these studies have investigated "discourse-pragmatic features" (DPFs), a cover term for a range of linguistic items, such as pragmatic markers, interjections, intensifiers, quotatives, and general extenders – elements that perform interpersonal and/or textual functions. Interpersonal functions convey attitudinal and interactional meaning, such as modifying propositions, seeking confirmation or eliciting hearer involvement. Textual functions, in contrast, indicate the structuring of discourse texts, for example by signalling interruption, continuation or turn-taking (Pichler, 2013: 46). Studies on GhE and NigE

have explored individual DPFs such as *actually* (Sarfo-Kantankah and Yussif, 2019) and *now* (Oladipupo and Unuabonah, 2021), as well as broader sets of DPFs (e.g. Unuabonah and Gut, 2018; Unuabonah, 2019). Other studies have examined borrowed DPFs from indigenous languages into GhE (Unuabonah and Anderson, 2023), NigE (e.g. Unuabonah and Daniel, 2020) and UgE (Meierkord and Isingoma, 2021). However, studies of DPFs in NigE and GhE are often embedded within comparative analyses of multiple varieties of English (e.g. Mazzon, 2019; Collins, 2022), limiting the depth of analysis devoted to specific DPFs. This study expands corpus-based research on DPFs by investigating *please* as a DPF in GhE, NigE, and UgE.

3 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review on *Please*

3.1 *Theoretical Perspectives on* Please

Please is grouped with other lexical politeness markers, such as *sorry* and *thanks* (Islentyeva et al., 2023: 297). In this study, politeness is conceptualised as a set of social and linguistic resources used to minimise potential confrontation in discourse (Lakoff, 1989: 102). Specifically, *please* functions as a lexical downgrader that mitigates or softens face-threatening acts (FTAs), such as requests and instructions, which may threaten *face* – the positive social value a person claims within a society (Goffman, 1967: 5; Aijmer, 1996: 164; Sato, 2008: 1254). Furthermore, *please* functions as an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID), clarifying or intensifying the intent of a communicative act (House, 1989; Murphy, 2025). Although *please* can function as a verb (e.g. I have to *please* him), it mostly functions as a DPF, which is syntactically optional, "syntactically mobile and less integrated into the sentence structure" (Sato, 2008: 1251). *Please* is a DPF that is largely associated with mitigating requests (Wichmann, 2004), but has also been observed to express surprise, urgency, disapproval, and dismissal (Islentyeva et al., 2023: 305; Murphy, 2025: 3).

Please has been studied from different theoretical perspectives, including intonational phonology, which explores the intonation patterns associated with *please* in different syntactic positions (Wichmann, 2004), and the speech act theory, which considers *please* as an illocutionary marker that modifies the force of a request (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2005). Other approaches have explored *please* within sentential grammar and interactional discourse, focusing respectively on its syntactic status and its role in managing interactional dynamics (Sato, 2008). Furthermore, House and Kádár (2021) have examined *please* through the lens of ritual frame theory, categorising it as a Ritual Frame Indicating Expression (RFIE). The present study draws on selected aspects

of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, alongside insights from postcolonial pragmatics and variational pragmatics to examine *please* in the three varieties.

Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) distinguish between positive politeness and negative politeness, based on classical Chinese notions of positive face and negative face (Hinze, 2012: 15). Positive face is the positive self-image of a person, which includes an individual's desire for approval, appreciation, and acceptance, whereas, negative face is the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, freedom of action, and freedom from imposition. Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that there are acts that threaten the positive and/or negative face of the speaker and/or the hearer. Thus, strategies that reduce such threats, including the use of *please*, are required to mitigate potential interpersonal friction.

Postcolonial pragmatics offers an additional framework for analysing *please* in AfE varieties. This approach explores different pragmatic elements (e.g. address terms, politeness markers, speech acts) in postcolonial contexts (e.g. Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda), where there is a fusion of local cultures and languages and European cultures and languages (e.g. English, French) due to colonial contact (Anchimbe, 2018). It takes into consideration a number of issues, including the transfer of local forms into a European language and vice versa, and the refunctionalisation of pragmatic elements in the European language, as used within postcolonial speech communities (Anchimbe and Janney, 2011: 1451–1452). Empirical studies illustrate these processes. For example, *please* in NigE appears to have been influenced by its local equivalents such as *ejoo* in Yoruba and *aguga* in Ogori (Adegbija, 1989: 71). Equally, Anderson (2009: 75) observes that *mi pa wɔ kyèw* (the equivalent of *please* in Akan), an indicator of respect, influences the use of *please* in GhE, while Meierkord and Isingoma (2021: 121) report that the use of *okay please* in UgE is a calqued expression of *kale bambi* in Luganda.

In addition, this study examines the structural and functional attributes of *please* from a variational pragmatic perspective. Variational pragmatics focuses on the "systematic analysis of the effects of regional and social factors on language in action and interaction" (Schneider and Barron, 2008: 1), as well as the investigation of pragmatic variation within shared linguistic and cultural ecologies. This approach bridges the gap between pragmatics and variational linguistics, and assists the description of language in use based on related social factors. Variational pragmatics operates on two major dimensions: types of language variation and levels of pragmatic analysis. The first dimension covers macro-social variables (e.g. region, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, and age) and micro-social variables, such as discourse type [e.g. writing], social situation [e.g. online chats], social distance/degree of familiarity, social

power, and social variation that influence pragmatic behaviour (Aijmer, 2013; Schneider and Félix-Brasdefer, 2022: 641). The second dimension comprises eight levels of pragmatic analysis, which include the formal (e.g. intensifiers), actional (e.g. speech acts), interactional (e.g. conversational openings), topical (e.g. topic development), organisational (e.g. turn-taking), stylistic (e.g. choice of tone), non-verbal (e.g. gestures), and prosodic (e.g. intonation) levels (Schneider and Félix-Brasdefer, 2022: 642–643).

Furthermore, Barron (2021) highlights three methodological principles as central to variational pragmatics: empiricity, contrastivity, and comparability. Empiricity entails reliance on authentic, systematically collected data. Contrastivity reflects the need to identify the distinctive pragmatic features of a variety through systematic comparison with similar pragmatic features in other varieties. Comparability underscores the requirement for consistency across both the contextual conditions and the pragmatic features under investigation. A key aspect of comparability is contextual comparability, which Barron conceptualises as multifaceted, encompassing linguistic, cognitive, social, and socio-cultural levels, realised as micro-social and macro-social variables. Linguistic context includes genre, surrounding text and intonation; cognitive context deals with the mental models and representations used in communicating appropriately, while socio-cultural context refers to culture-specific knowledge of social norms, conventions, and values that shape language use. The current study adheres to these principles. It is empirical, containing quantitative data; contrastive, investigating the DPF across three different AfEs; and comparable, comprising corpora that have similar design. Moreover, the research concentrates on the formal level of pragmatic analysis that enables a form-function mapping of the DPF *please* in GhE, NigE, and UgE. This approach allows for the exploration of how regional variation influences the frequency, structural features, and pragmatic functions of *please* across various text categories.

3.2 Please *in Different Varieties of English*

Previous studies have examined *please* in diverse English varieties. In one of the earliest systematic studies, House (1989) investigates *please* as a marker of politeness in various speech acts. She examines how English *please* and German *bitte* function in requests, using data from both naturally occurring conversations and elicited request situations. Her findings reveal that *please* in English and *bitte* in German are not direct equivalents, and that *please* has a more fixed IFID role in English. While *please* is strongly associated with requests, *bitte* has a broader range of meanings, which include request marker, response to thanks, offering something, and inviting. Building on this, Aijmer (1996)

explores *please* as a lexical mitigating device in BrE requests obtained from the London-Lund corpus. She notes that *please* mostly occurs with requests that are structured as imperatives, followed by those introduced by *could you*. She also observes that *please* is especially common in business letters and written notices, where formal politeness is required, as well as in routinised situations such as telephone calls. Beyond its role as a request mitigator, Aijmer finds that *please* may be used to indicate acceptance, convey appeal or persuasion, and express irritation, rudeness, or criticism when produced with a falling intonation in clause-initial position, particularly when being requested "not to do something, or to stop doing something" (Aijmer, 1996: 168).

Wichmann (2004) examines the syntactic, pragmatic, and contextual restrictions of *please*, and its intonation patterns in BrE, using ICE-Great Britain. She observes that *please* can co-occur with all surface forms of declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives, and elliptical sentence structures, and may occur in initial, final or medial position. *Please* may also co-occur with indirect requests, mitigated commands, and formulaic responses (e.g. *yes, please*). Wichmann also highlights the strong association between intonational patterns and positional placement of *please* in sentences (Wichmann, 2004: 1535). Similarly, in a comparative study of American English (AmE) and New Zealand English (NZE), Sato (2008) examined 100 tokens of *please* in spoken corpora and found a correlation between positional placement and directive force. *Please* in the initial position is often associated with demands and pleas, where the speaker's personality and assertiveness are foregrounded. In medial position, *please* is typically used in conventional polite requests and commands, while the final position tends to occur in "task-based requests in which the speaker's restricted behavior as a social individual is exhibited" (Sato, 2008: 1249). Notably, Sato observes that *please* does not occur in the initial position of any of the yes-no interrogatives in her data (Sato, 2008: 1250). Across both corpora, *please* occurs most frequently in the final position of turn constructional units (minimal units from which a turn can be formed).

Barron (2008) investigates the realisation of requests in Irish English (IrE) and English English (EngE) using a DCT to explore how imposition and social distance influence mitigation strategies. The findings reveal that requests in both varieties are mitigated through syntactic downgraders, lexical/phrasal downgraders, and external modifiers. She situates *please* within the lexical and phrasal downgrader category, noting that its function is context-dependent. In standard situations, such as a police officer issuing a request, *please* acts as a transparent mitigator, softening the illocutionary force of the request. However, in non-standard situations, its role becomes ambiguous, thereby increasing perceived directness. Syntactically, *please* typically appears

clause-finally, particularly within query-preparatory strategies (e.g. "*Could you move your car, please?*"), and often co-occurs with modals and embedded structures (e.g. "*I was wondering if …*"). Its role in these constructions enhances the indirectness and politeness of the request. Quantitative data reinforce its pragmatic weight in formal settings, with *please* appearing in 100% of lexical/phrasal downgraders in IrE and in 76.2% in EngE.

Murphy and De Felice (2018) investigate the pragmatics of *please* in British and American corporate email requests. Their findings reveal that *please* is used in British requests at more than twice the rate observed in American requests, regardless of request mood type. Regarding levels of imposition, *please* occurs more frequently in low-imposition and no-imposition contexts in BrE, where it functions as a conventional politeness marker, especially in formulaic and routine expressions, which are considered somewhat outdated in AmE. In terms of sentence mood, *please* appears more often in imperatives and interrogatives than in indicatives and conditionals in both varieties. Positional preferences also differ: BrE favours clause-initial and clause-medial placements, while AmE tends to restrict *please* to clause-medial use. This pattern reinforces existing claims that BrE treats *please* as a routine politeness device, whereas AmE employs it more selectively. Overall, the paper demonstrates that *please* functions not only as a politeness marker but also as an indicator of broader cultural and communicative norms, showing how politeness is shaped not only by social factors but also by grammatical forms and linguistic tradition.

Kádár and House (2020) explore *please* and its Chinese counterpart, *qing* as RFIEs using data from the British National Corpus and the Modern Chinese General Balanced Corpus, respectively. They conceptualise ritual frames as standardised, socially embedded contexts, such as classrooms, courts or public notices, where interaction is shaped by social roles and obligations. The significance of *please* in this study lies in its function as a marker of ritual legitimacy rather than interpersonal politeness. In institutional contexts, *please* reinforces the speaker's authority and the hearer's obligations. Structurally, it is found mostly in clause-final and clause-medial positions, embedded in imperatives and interrogatives; it is used to reaffirm ritual behaviour, particularly in settings marked by strong role asymmetry. Notably, *please* can intensify rather than soften a request, such as in political or legal discourse, where it underscores authority and decorum.

Alongside other politeness markers, Islentyeva et al. (2023: 305) examine the different senses of *please* in 100 tokens of *please* in spoken BrE, using the Spoken British National Corpus 2014 (Love, 2020). They note that, apart from its core sense of politely requesting something, *please* can be used to politely give instructions, accept or agree to something, express urgency, surprise, irritation

or irony. Murphy (2025) explores *please* in BrE and AmE using the Global Web-based English corpus. She finds that while *please* appears most frequently with imperatives, it co-occurs with a broad range of speech act types such as requests, instructions, information, advice, offers, prayers, dismissals, polite imperatives, facetious expressions, permission and acceptance. The study demonstrates that BrE usage of *please* aligns closely with low-imposition, ritual politeness, whereas AmE usage is more context-sensitive and oriented towards managing face-risk. These distinctions are evident not only in frequency but also in how *please* functions across various non-directive and confrontational contexts. The study concludes that while both BrE and AmE primarily use *please* as a request mitigator, their secondary functions diverge considerably. Taken together, these studies (summarised in Table 1) confirm that *please* is a pragmatically rich and highly adaptable expression, whose significance varies by cultural norms, situational formality, and dialectal conventions.

TABLE 1 An overview of previous research on different aspects of *please*

Previous research	**Clause positions**	**Clause types**	**Functions**
House (1989)	initial, medial, final	imperatives, interrogatives, declaratives	clarification, upgrading the force of a request
Aijmer (1996)	medial, final	imperatives, modal interrogatives	acceptance, convey appeal or persuasion, convey irritation, rudeness and criticism
Wichmann (2004)	initial, medial and final	declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives, elliptical sentence structures	requests, mitigate commands, formulaic responses
Sato (2008)	initial, medial and final	imperatives, interrogatives	demands, pleas, conventional polite requests, commands

TABLE 1 An overview of previous research on different aspects of *please* (*cont.*)

Previous research	Clause positions	Clause types	Functions
Barron (2008)	mostly clause-final	interrogatives with modals, embedded clauses	mitigator in standard situations, such as requests; in non-standard situations, its role becomes ambiguous
Murphy and De Felice (2018)	initial, medial and final	imperatives, modal interrogatives	formality, urgency or condescension
Kádár and House (2020)	medial and final	imperatives and interrogatives	reinforce authority, intensifier and softener
Islentyeva et al. (2023)	mostly clause-final, also initial and medial	interrogatives, imperatives	politely give instructions, accept or agree to something, express urgency, surprise, irritation or irony
Murphy (2025)		imperatives	requests, instructions, information, advice, offers, prayers, dismissals, polite imperatives, permission and acceptance

In the context of English as a foreign language, Shafran (2019) examines the impact of interactants' social power/social status on the use and directness of *please* in requests made by advanced L1 Hebrew and L1 Arabic speakers of English. Her findings suggest that L1 Arabic speakers employ *please* in contexts where the addressee is either lower or higher in status than the addresser. In contrast, L1 Hebrew speakers tend to use *please* only when the addressee is subordinate in status to the addresser. She attributes these differences to the influence of the speakers' native languages and cultures, as well as their

knowledge of the target language (Shafran, 2019: 8). In a complementary foreign language context, Jia (2024) examines the form and functional adaptation of *please* on a Chinese microblogging platform. The study finds that while *please* retains its core request-mitigating function, it undergoes positional and functional shifts in the local online discourse. Most notably, *please* appears frequently in clause-final position, where it intensifies emotional emphasis and signals in-group membership within the online community. In initial position, however, *please* is often used to convey irony or negative stance. In terms of occurrence in sentence types, *please* in Chinese occurs predominantly with imperatives, where it is used to convey a strong illocutionary force. Jia attributes these adaptations to competition with Chinese pragmatic markers and the platform's cultural ecology, where English elements convey modernity, trendiness, and nuanced stance-taking.

In the context of English as a second-language, Obilade (1984) explores the influence of Nigerian speakers' local languages on their judgement of politeness structures in English. He observes that Nigerians of different ethnic groups (Efik, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba) all judged sentence structures that begin with *please* as the most polite, followed by those that begin with *could you …?*, *I'd appreciate …*, and *would you …?* Furthermore, Adegbija (1989) explores and compares different kinds of politeness strategies in NigE, Yoruba, and Ogori interactions. He notes that forms of politeness are often transferred from local Nigerian languages into NigE. He observes that *ejoo* in Yoruba and *aguga* in Ogori – both equivalents of *please* – are used in marking indirectness (Adegbija, 1989: 71), a form of negative politeness, similar to the use of *please* in BrE. Although these studies highlight the central role of *please* in marking politeness in NigE, they focus on evaluative perception and pragmatic transfer, offering limited analysis of sentence types, positions or functions of *please* in actual usage.

Furthermore, Lwanga-Lumu (2002) investigates internal request modification among Luganda English speakers using DCTs. She observes that L1 Luganda learners of English overuse *please*, attributing this to a desire to avoid ambiguity in expressing politeness in their interactions. In addition to its core request-mitigating function, *please* is also used as an attention-getter, which she attributes to influence from Luganda pragmatic norms, where attention-getters are sometimes used to indicate politeness (Lwanga-Lumu, 2002: 299). However, her study is limited in scope, as it focuses solely on Luganda speakers and does not capture UgE speakers who speak other local Ugandan languages such as Ateso, making it difficult to generalise her findings to all UgE speakers. In a similar vein, Anderson (2009) observes that *please* in GhE

functions as an indicator of respect, leading to its occurrence in contexts atypical of native English varieties. For example, expressions such as "please, good evening" or "please, thank you" reflect the influence of indigenous Ghanaian languages and cultures on GhE (Anderson, 2009: 75). She also observes that *mi pa wɔ kyèw* (the equivalent of *please* in Akan) is commonly used by younger people and those of lower social status as an indicator of respect or politeness towards older or higher-status interlocutors. Despite their valuable insights into the sociocultural embedding of *please* in AfE varieties, both studies are constrained by methodological reliance on DCTs, which, as earlier noted, tend to limit naturalness and elicit idealised or prototypical responses rather than capturing the full range of variation found in spontaneous discourse. In addition, neither study fully explores the structural and functional aspects of *please* in the two varieties. In contrast, the present study carries out a more comprehensive study of over a thousand tokens of *please* across three AfE varieties, using both spoken and written corpus data to explore its structural and functional distribution.

4 Data and Method

The research data were sourced from the Ghanaian, Nigerian, and Ugandan components of the ICE corpora (ICE-GH, ICE-NIG, and ICE-UG). Each of the three corpora, with similar structure and composition, comprised approximately one million words of spoken (~600,000 words) and written (~400,000 words) English texts of diverse genres. The spoken component includes private dialogues (e.g. phone calls), public dialogues (e.g. class lessons), unscripted monologues (e.g. demonstrations), and scripted monologues (e.g. broadcast news). The written component comprises non-printed writing (e.g. social letters), informational writing (e.g. academic writing), instructional writing (e.g. skills/hobbies), persuasive writing (e.g. editorials), and creative writing (e.g. novels). These texts were obtained from speakers who were 18 years and above, and who had been educated up to at least the secondary school level in their respective countries (Huber and Dako, 2013; Gut, 2014; Meierkord and Isingoma, 2022). As indicated in the metadata of ICE-NIG and ICE-UG (the authors did not have access to participant information for ICE-GH), speakers were from different ethnic groups in their respective countries; as such, instances of code-switching and borrowings from indigenous African languages were included in the three corpora (see Isingoma, 2016b; Unuabonah and Daniel, 2020; Unuabonah and Anderson, 2023). In order to

maintain comparability, certain text types were excluded. Since ICE-UG does not contain cross-examinations and legal presentations, cross-examinations was removed from ICE-GH (it did not have any legal presentations), while cross-examinations and legal presentations were removed from ICE-NIG for the purpose of this study.

To address the research objectives of this study, corpus searches and concordance analyses were performed to investigate the frequency, structural patterns (which involved the positioning of *please* and occurrence with different clause types), text type variation, and pragmatic functions of *please* across the three AfE corpora. The three corpora were analysed with AntConc (Anthony, 2015), a widely used corpus analysis toolkit. All retrieved instances of *please* were searched manually in order to exclude cases where *please* was used as a verb, as in (1), where it was repeated, as in (2), where it occurred in Pidgin English, as in (3), where the usage is unclear due to incomplete or ambiguous context, as in (4), and where *please* was mentioned as a word rather than used pragmatically, as in (5).

(1) Combine colours that *please* you (ICE-NIG_SkHo_17)
(2) But all of us we are praying to God *please please please* our good God (ICE-UG_S1B_005)
(3) *please* make you take God mecy pardon me o! (ICE-NIG_sl_28)
(4) *Please* <unclear>several_words<\unclear> they search are you are you you seem uh (ICE-GH_ S1A_070)
(5) language expressions like oya oya is Yoruba okay and then jo *please* means *please* (ICE-NIG_unsp_01)

Using a corpus pragmatic approach, the data were examined qualitatively and quantitatively. The qualitative analysis involved close scrutiny of the texts, which aided the coding of *please* based on its positioning, co-occurrence with different clause types, as well as its pragmatic functions in the different utterances. The data were coded for the position that *please* occupied in the utterances, which could be initial, if *please* appeared before the subject of the clause, even if preceded by another DPF; medial, if it occurred after the subject and in any other position within the clause; and final, if it appeared at the end of the clause. *Please* was also categorised as (semi-)free, if it appeared alone or in combination with another DPF such as *yes* or *okay*. Further coding was done in order to examine the occurrence of *please* with different clause types, and these were categorised into declarative, imperative, interrogative, and elliptical clauses (as noun, verb or adverbial phrases) (Wichmann, 2004: 1530). The frequency of *please* was also categorised and coded based on their pragmatic functions, some of which were listed in previous research (e.g.

Islentyeva et al., 2023) and those found in the data (see Section 5.2). The study also examined text type variation, by examining the distribution of *please* across various genres (e.g. conversations, business letters) (see Section 5.3).

Quantitative analysis was done using descriptive and inferential statistics. Raw counts of *please* in the three corpora were obtained, and relative frequencies were calculated per million words (pmw). Simple percentage scores and chi-square tests were equally utilised to calculate the favoured positional patterns of *please* within clauses, as well as the preferred clausal types with which it co-occurred. The chi-square test, which compares observed and expected frequencies across categories, was used to test the null hypothesis: there is no significant difference in the frequency of *please* across the three English varieties. To further examine the use of *please* across these three AfE varieties, mixed effects logistic regression model analyses were performed using the lme4 package in R. The dependent variables included the choice of *please* in diverse clausal positions (initial, medial, final, [semi-]free), with different clause types (imperative, declarative, interrogative, elliptical), and in different text types (spoken, written). The independent variable is the variety of English (ICE-GH, ICE-NIG, ICE-UG).

5 Results and Analysis

The results reveal that *please* occurs most frequently in NigE (N = 578; 596.2pmw), followed by GhE (N = 294; 309.7pmw) and UgE (N = 217; 223.5pmw). A chi-square test reveals a significant difference in the overall frequencies of *please* among the three AfE varieties ($\chi 2 = 199.18$, $p < 0.0001$). While *please* is used most frequently in NigE, its frequency in GhE is much closer to UgE than to NigE. A comparable check in ICE-GB (excluding cross-examinations and legal presentations and other non-DPF forms) indicates that *please* occurs less frequently in BrE (N = 192; 188.6pmw) than in the three AfE varieties. The succeeding sub-sections cover the results for the structural patterns and pragmatic functions of *please*, as well as its use across different text types in the three AfE corpora.

5.1 *Structural Patterns of* Please *in African Englishes*

This section examines the structural patterns of *please*, focusing on its positioning within clauses and its occurrence with different clause types. The results reveal that *please* predominantly appears in clause-initial position across all three AfE varieties, as in (6). It also occurs, though less frequently,

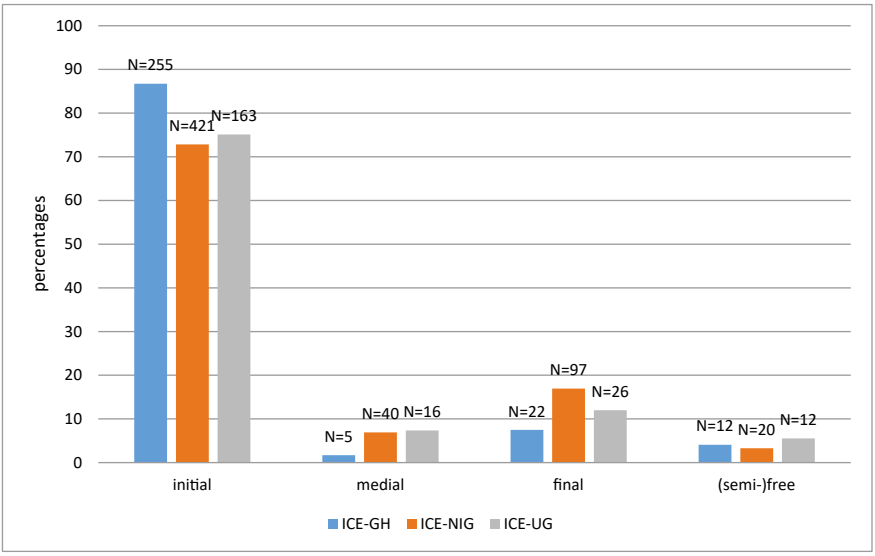


FIGURE 1 Distribution of *please* across the four clausal positions in ICE-GH, ICE-NIG, and ICE-UG

in clause-medial and clause-final positions, as in (7) and (8), respectively (see Figure 1). *Please* may also function as a semi-free form, occurring with only a DPF, as in (9), or as a free-standing form, occurring alone, as in (31). Due to their relatively low frequency in the corpora, both of these uses are collectively categorised as (semi-)free occurrences.

(6) *Please* I don't have credit on that phone because MTN is charging so much for for a credit (ICE-GH_S1A_010)

(7) I do believe they have reported thus to you. You may *please* acknowledge receipt of the same. (ICE-NIG_sl_18)

(8) Honourable members this is a ceremony *please* (ICE-UG_S1B_052)

(9) B: Hello
A: Yes *please*
B: I said I delayed a bit (ICE-UG_S1A_093)

Figure 1 shows the distribution of *please* across the three clausal positions, as well as where it occurred alone or with only a DPF in the three varieties.

A mixed-effects regression analysis was performed to investigate the distribution of *please* based on different clause positions (initial, medial, final, and semi-free). The analysis did show significant differences among the three varieties $\chi^2(3) = 21.54$, $p < 0.001$, indicating a strong fit for the model and robust statistical significance. Specifically, *please* is significantly more preferred in the initial position across all three varieties compared to the other clausal

positions. ICE-GH exhibits the highest proportion in this position (b = 0.73, SE = 0.28, z = 2.61, p = 0.009), followed by ICE-UG (b = 0.88, SE = 0.30, z = 2.93, p = 0.003) compared to ICE-NIG. Conversely, *please* is least frequent in the medial and final positions, but it is more commonly found in these positions in ICE-UG and ICE-NIG than in ICE-GH. The two varieties correlate positively with medial and final positions: ICE-NIG (medial: b = 0.80, SE = 0.40, z = -2.00, p = 0.045; final: b = 0.60, SE = 0.35, z = 1.71, p = 0.087); ICE-UG (medial: b = 1.20, SE = 0.40, z = 3.00, p = 0.003; final: b = 1.25, SE = 0.40, z = 3.12, p = 0.002).

Regarding clause types, the results reveal that *please* mostly co-occurs with imperative clauses in all three corpora, as in (10), and less frequently with declarative and interrogative clauses, as in (11) and (12), respectively. Occasional uses also appear in elliptical clauses, as in (13).

(10) *Please* take note of these curves <,> we'll come back to it (ICE-GH_S1B_19)
(11) that was the decision at that meeting I have my doubts *please* (ICE-NIG_btr_03)
(12) Could you *please* repeat it (ICE-UG_S1B_13)
(13) then apply immediately. *Please*, immediately. I think this is a rare opportunity (ICE-NIG_sl_04)

Figure 2 displays the distribution of *please* across the four clause types in the three varieties. It shows that *please* predominantly occurs with imperative clauses across the three AfE varieties, followed by its use with declarative clauses. In the case of ICE-GH and ICE-UG, the third most frequent clause type with *please* is interrogative clauses, followed by elliptical clauses. This differs in ICE-NIG, where *please* occurs more frequently with elliptical clauses, followed

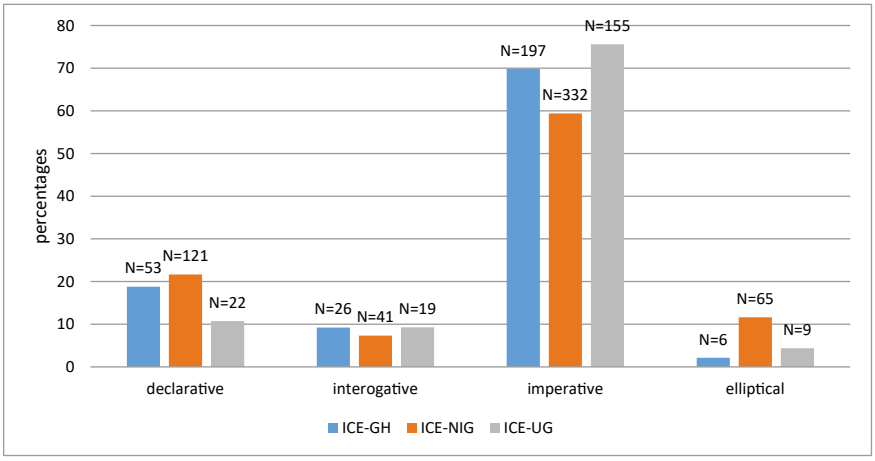


FIGURE 2 Frequencies of *please* with different clause types across ICE-GH, ICE-NIG, and ICE-UG

by interrogative clauses. The regression analysis of clausal types revealed a significant difference in the use of *please* across the three varieties ($\chi^2(3) = 14.32$, p = 0.003). Specifically, *please* is significantly more likely to occur with imperative clauses (b = -4.8, SE = 0.450, z = -2.67, p = 0.007); with its highest frequency observed in ICE-UG, followed by ICE-GH and ICE-NIG. *Please* is, however, used significantly more often with elliptical clauses in ICE-NIG than in the other AfE varieties, with regression results indicating significantly higher odds of its use in elliptical clauses in ICE-NIG (b = 0.18, SE = 0.25, z = 0.72, p = 0.00473). No significant differences were found in the use of *please* with elliptical clauses in ICE-GH and ICE-UG.

5.2 *Pragmatic Functions of* Please *in the Three African English Varieties*

Please mainly performs many interpersonal roles and only a few textual functions in the three AfE varieties. At the interpersonal level, *please* is largely used to mitigate face-threatening acts and to reinforce other speech functions. It mitigates instructions, requests, suggestions, refusal/rejections, confrontations, advice, questions, corrections, and warnings. It is also used to emphasise or reinforce the speech acts of informing, offering, appealing/pleading, apologising, granting permission, acknowledging/accepting, and thanking. At the textual level, *please* is used to get a hearer's attention and to signal interruption.

Please is mainly employed to mitigate instructions, requests, suggestions, and refusal/rejections, as these speech acts have the potential to threaten the negative face of both the addresser and the addressee, as in (14), (15), (16), and (17), respectively.

(14) In fact you're we will be discussing it and you will cover all the processes so *please* take note (ICE-GH_S1B_11)

(15) I shall be grateful if you could, *please*, serve as my host professor (ICE-NIG_bl_14)

(16) I suggest to Mister president *please* Mister president take the NFF away from the NSC (ICE-NIG_bdis_21)

(17) B: how how long have you been in GBC
A: *Please* I do not want you to estimate my age full stop (ICE-GH_S1A_45)

In (14), *please* mitigates the potential face-threatening impact of the instruction *take note* on the listener, while in (15), it mitigates the face-threat in the request for the listener to act as a host professor. In (16), *please* is used to mitigate the suggestion directed at the president, preventing it from being misinterpreted as a command. Since instructions, requests and suggestions can threaten both the positive and negative face of the interactants, *please* serves as a politeness marker that helps manage these interactions. For the addresser, the risk lies in having their instructions, requests and suggestions rejected, which could imply

a lack of approval of their actions. For the addressee, their negative face may be threatened, since directives from the addresser may impinge on their freedom of action and freedom from imposition. In (17), *please* reduces the damaging effect of a blunt refusal to answer a question on the duration of Speaker A's stay at GBC (Ghana Broadcasting Corporation). This refusal could threaten the positive face of Speaker B by implying disapproval. In all these examples, *please* performs an interactive function, signalling politeness and indicating the addresser's awareness of and concern for the negative face of the addressee. Thus, *please* is indicative of the addressers' sensitivity to the potential strain their responses may place on their relationship with the addressee.

Please is also used to mitigate confrontations, advice, questions, corrections, and warnings, as in (18), (19), (20), (21), and (22), respectively.

(18) *Please* don't The explanation may not hold from the little that I know and the practical experience I have. (ICE-UG_W1B_12)

(19) First my dad when I told about my nursing he told me <quote> *please* <w> you're </w> still young and you need you study (ICE-UG_S1A_27)

(20) *Please* when when will you send it because it's very important that I get it soon (ICE-GH_ S1A_92)

(21) *please* that word is fellow not follow (ICE-NIG_btr_02)

(22) But *please* my warning is if I give it to you I warn you not to s to drink alone (ICE-GH_S2A_52)

In (18), *please* is used to reduce the face-threatening impact of a confrontational directive instructing the listener not to hold onto an explanation. In (19), *please* precedes a piece of advice, possibly to soften its tone and prevent it from being interpreted as a mild rejection of the child's proposal to the father. In (20), *please* appears before a question that could threaten the face of the listener, who appears to have defaulted in sending the requested item. In (21), it precedes a correction on the appropriate word choice, mitigating its impact on the listener by reducing the potential embarrassment associated with being corrected. Similarly, in (22), *please* is used before a warning – cautioning the addressee against taking only a herbal drink – to tone down the potential face-threatening nature of the warning. In each of these expressions, it is utilised to mitigate threats to the addressee's negative face, as the utterances could impinge on the addressee's freedom of action. The function of *please* in these cases is interactive, as it is used to maintain interpersonal relationships by signalling politeness and concern for the addressee's autonomy.

In some cases, *please* is used to emphasise or reinforce the speech acts of informing, offering, appealing/pleading, and apologising, as in (23), (24), (25), and (26), respectively.

(23) This is a serious welfare matter, *please*. (ICE-UG_W1B_008)
(24) *Please* be assured that the doors of the University are open (ICE-NIG_bl_63)
(25) *Please* I'm calling on you to join us on this occasion churches religious leaders (ICE-GH_S2B_15)
(26) Dear Dr, *Please* pardon the long period of silence. (ICE-NIG_bl_39)

In (23), *please* appears after a comment on welfare to assert the importance of the subject, while in (24), it precedes an offer that reassures the listener of unrestricted access to the institution at any time. In (24) and (25), *please* is used as a politeness marker to appeal to the addressee's negative face by acknowledging their basic claim to territories and personal preserves. Providing information and offers may indicate that the addressee does not have the information or needs access to the university, respectively, which could be face-threatening. Scholars such as Hancher (1979) have argued that offers have a directive nature, as they seek to influence the behaviour of the addressee. Thus, *please* is used to tone down the directive nature of the offer. In (25), *please* emphasises an appeal to religious leaders to participate in an event, while in (26), it precedes an apology for a delayed response. In both cases, *please* emphasises the sincerity of the plea or apology. Here, *please* is utilised as a politeness marker to appeal to the negative face of the addressee, whose personal autonomy may have been infringed upon by the plea or the perceived offence requiring an apology.

In a few cases, *please* is used to emphasise the speech acts of granting permission, acknowledging/accepting, and thanking, as in (27), (28), and (29), respectively.

(27) allow the Minister to tell us his position then you can comment *please* (ICE-UG_S1B_56)
(28) Speaker 3 okay page by page okay
Speaker 1 yes *please* any page either page one here (ICE-NIG_btr_03)
(29) "Shining Star Primary Secondary Day And Boring School Nazzeena, thank you *please*!" they chorused. (ICE-UG_W2F_015)

In (27), *please* emphasises the permission given by the Speaker of the House of Representatives to the addressee (one of the Honourable Representatives) to provide comments after a Minister's presentation during a parliamentary debate. In (28), *please* is used to reinforce the acceptance or confirmation that a member is permitted to point out items requiring corrections in the minutes of a meeting, page by page. In this case, *please* is also used to appeal to the positive face of the addressee in order to mark an approval of their action. In (29), *please* reinforces an expression of gratitude by students when their school was mentioned during a meeting with a Member of Parliament. Based on the influence of local African languages (see Section 6 for a more detailed discussion),

please is used to signal a positive attitude from the addresser to the addressee (Meierkord and Isingoma, 2021), thus reflecting an appeal to the positive face of the addressee.

Please rarely performs textual roles, with a few existing instances where it is used to get the addressees' attention, as in (30), and to signal an interruption, as in (31).

(30) *please* member constitution review committee I'm seeing one of them (ICE-NIG_btr_09)

(31) Speaker 4 but we are for the progress
Speaker 1 *please*
Speaker 4 please don't cut me short (ICE-NIG_btr_06)

In (30), *please* signals the speaker's attempt at getting the attention of the co-interactants on the subject of discourse. While this function is categorised as a textual function (Brinton, 2008: 17–18), it also performs an interpersonal function, as *please* is used to mitigate the threat to the addressee's negative face, since seeking the addressee's attention may be perceived as an imposition. In (31), Speaker 1 uses *please* to interrupt Speaker 4, while Speaker 4 uses *please* to mitigate the request that Speaker 1 should refrain from interrupting. The use of *please* in this context serves a textual function since it indicates how the utterance relates to the ongoing talk. However, it also serves an interpersonal function, as the interruption itself may threaten the addressee's negative face (i.e. freedom from imposition).

Figure 3 displays the distribution of the discourse-pragmatic functions of *please* across the three AfE corpora. The figure indicates that the function of *please* as a mitigator is more frequent than its function as an emphasiser or reinforcer. Across all three varieties, the most frequent discourse-pragmatic function of *please* is to mitigate instructions, followed by its use in mitigating requests. This pattern suggests a shared communicative preference in the region for softening directive speech acts, possibly reflecting culturally salient norms of politeness and indirectness. The frequency of *please* in mitigating instructions is higher than other functions, which may be connected to the institutional and professional settings where directives commonly occur, such as workplaces (see Section 5.3). In both NigE and UgE, the third most frequent function of *please* is to emphasise an appeal/plea, while in GhE, *please* emphasises information and appeal/plea at similar rates. In NigE and UgE, the function of emphasising information is fairly common, while other functions occur at lower rates or are not present in some of the varieties. This distribution highlights both shared pragmatic tendencies and variety-specific preferences, hinting at localised norms in speech interaction and politeness strategies.

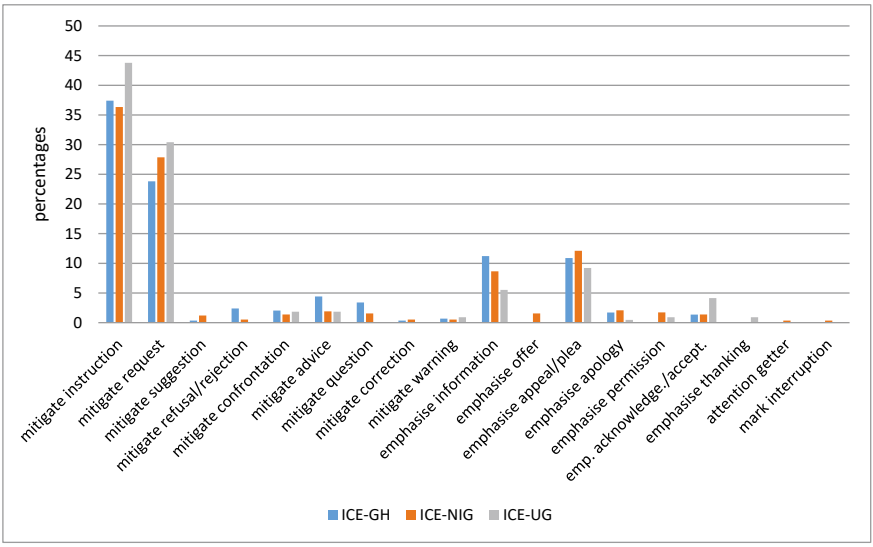


FIGURE 3 Discourse-pragmatic functions of *please* in ICE-GH, ICE-NIG, and ICE-UG

5.3 Please *in Different Text Types across the Three African Englishes*

Overall, *please* occurs more frequently in spoken texts (N = 386; 678.3pmw) than in written texts (N = 192; 479pmw) in NigE, while it occurs more frequently in written texts in GhE (N = 170; 393.1pmw) and UgE (N = 100; 248pmw) than in spoken texts in GhE (N = 124; 239.9pmw) and UgE (N =117; 206.1pmw). The regression analysis revealed that this difference is statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 15.87$, p = 0.002), indicating that the use of *please* differs significantly across the three AfE varieties in relation to text type. The analysis also showed a positive and significant correlation between *please* and written texts across all three varieties. Specifically, *please* was more prevalent in written texts in ICE-GH (b = 0.75, SE = 0.35, z = 2.14, p = 0.032) and ICE-UG (b = 0.58, SE = 0.28, z = 2.07, p = 0.038), compared to ICE-NIG (b = 1.12, SE = 0.40, z = 2.80, p = 0.005). These results suggest that the use of *please* in AfE varieties is significantly influenced by text type, with a stronger association with written texts – no significant effect was observed in spoken texts.

Figure 4 displays the distribution of *please* across different individual text types in the three AfE corpora. In ICE-GH, *please* occurs most frequently in social letters, followed by business letters and demonstrations. In ICE-NIG, *please* appears most often in business transactions, parliamentary debates, and social letters. In ICE-UG, *please* is most prevalent in parliamentary debates, social letters, and business letters. Figure 4 also shows that there is a broader

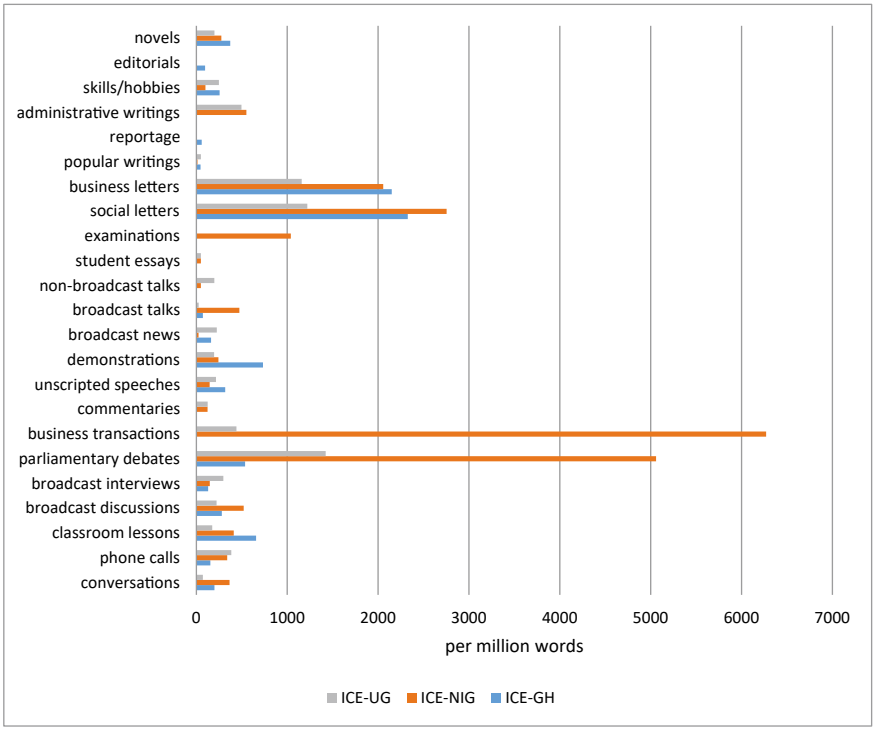


FIGURE 4 Distribution of *please* across different text types in ICE-GH, ICE-NIG, and ICE-UG

distribution of *please* across text categories in ICE-NIG and ICE-UG than in ICE-GH. Notably, *please* does not occur in ICE-GH administrative writings, examinations, student essays, commentaries, reportage, and business transactions; in ICE-UG, *please* is absent in editorials, reportage, and examinations; and in ICE-NIG, it is absent in popular writing, reportage, and editorials. Across all three varieties, *please* is not found in academic writing or skills/hobbies.

6 Discussion

This paper pursued the following research objectives: (a) to examine the frequencies and structural patterns of *please* across GhE, NigE, and UgE; (b) to explore the pragmatic functions of *please* across these three varieties; and (c) to investigate the use of *please* across different text types in the three AfE varieties. This section discusses the results provided in Section 5.

In relation to frequency, the higher rate of occurrence of *please* in NigE compared to its frequency in GhE and UgE aligns with findings for lexical politeness markers, such as *sorry* (Unuabonah et al., 2025), which suggest that lexical politeness markers are more frequently used in NigE than in GhE and UgE. Meierkord (2016) also observes that *please* occurs infrequently in ICE-UG social letters. This may suggest that politeness is more explicitly marked in NigE than in the other two varieties, in addition to the use of local Nigerian equivalents of *please* such as *jo*(*r*) (Yoruba), *biko* (Igbo), and *abeg* (Nigerian Pidgin) in NigE (Unuabonah and Oladipupo, 2021; Unuabonah et al., 2021), which, though rare, are attested in ICE-NIG. Obilade (1984) notes that NigE speakers from different ethnic groups perceive utterances starting with *please* as much more polite than those introduced by *could you* or *I'd appreciate*. It is also possible that the higher frequency of *please* in NigE compared to GhE and UgE may be influenced by the transfer of more *please* equivalents from Nigerian languages into NigE than *please* equivalents from Ghanaian and Ugandan languages into GhE and UgE, respectively (see Anderson 2009; Meierkord and Isingoma, 2021). This is possible given Nigeria's extensive linguistic diversity, with over 500 local languages, compared to 73 in Ghana and 41 in Uganda. Moreover, the higher frequency of *please* in NigE – shaped by greater local language influence from local languages – validates the notion that NigE is closer to Schneider's (2007) endonormative stabilisation stage (stage 4) than the other two varieties.

Notwithstanding, the frequency of *please* in these three AfE varieties is higher than in other varieties, such as BrE. The higher frequency of *please* in these three AfE varieties may be linked to the influence of indigenous African languages and cultures, which is typical of postcolonial contexts (Anchimbe, 2018). For instance, Anderson (2009: 75) observes that *please* may appear in contexts where it would not typically occur in native English varieties (e.g. "please, good evening" or "please, thank you"), potentially contributing to its increased frequency in GhE. She notes that this may be due to the influence of the Akan equivalent of *please*, *mi pa wʊ kyèw*, which is used to indicate respect. Meierkord and Isingoma (2021: 121) also report that *please* is used in conjunction with *okay* in UgE, whereas AmE and BrE users would typically just say *okay*. Thus, *okay please* is a calqued expression from *kale bambi* in Luganda, which emphasises agreement and expresses a positive attitude from the addresser to the addressee. A similar example is the use of *please* when thanking someone (e.g. "Yeeees, thank you please!" they chorused [ICE-UG_W2F_15]). *Bambi*, the local form of *please* in Luganda, also appears in ICE-UG. The relatively high frequency of *please* in UgE compared to BrE may also be as a result of what Lwanga-Lumu (2002: 299) characterises as the overuse of *please* by UgE speakers.

With regard to positioning, *please* predominantly occupies the clause-initial position in all three AfE varieties, which appears to differ from its positioning in other varieties such as AmE and NZE, where *please* occurs most frequently in the final position of turn constructional units (Sato, 2008: 1250). While *please* does not occur in the initial position of any of the yes-no interrogatives in the American and New Zealand data, it appears in yes-no interrogatives across all three AfE data (e.g. *please* may I just speak on this issue [ICE-NIG_btr_03]). Equally, Kádár and House (2020) note that *please* largely occurs in clause-final and clause-medial positions in BrE (using data from the BNC), further highlighting differences with the three AfE varieties. The implication is that, in the three AfE varieties, *please* is typically placed early in an utterance irrespective of the clause type, potentially reflecting linguistic and cultural differences in politeness strategies between Western and African contexts. As earlier pointed out, this difference may be due to the influence of indigenous African languages on AfE. For instance, *ejoo* in Yoruba and *aguga* in Ogori often appear in the clause-initial position (Adegbija, 1989: 71). Similarly, Unuabonah and Oladipupo (2021) argue that when the borrowed *jo*(*r*) from Yoruba occurs in NigE, it is used to mark politeness in the clause-initial position and is largely used to signal emphatic functions in the clause-final position. This pattern seems to reflect in the positioning of *please* in NigE, where it is used to mark politeness or mitigate FTAs.

As regards the association of *please* with different clause types, *please* co-occurs chiefly with imperatives, which include direct requests and instructions. This pattern is in line with findings from studies on *please* in other varieties, such as BrE, AmE and NZE (Aijmer, 1996; Sato, 2008). Notwithstanding, the percentage of *please* + imperatives is notably higher in GhE, NigE, and UgE than in the IC Englishes. Specifically, *please* co-occurs with imperatives at rates of 69.9% in GhE, 59.5% in NigE, and 75.6% in UgE, compared to 36% in BrE, 40% in AmE, and 34% in NZE (Aijmer, 1996; Sato, 2008). This difference may stem from the tendency of AfE varieties to rely more on imperatives to make requests. For example, Gut and Unuabonah (2022) found that direct requests (imperatives) occur more frequently than other kinds of requests in NigE and that direct requests are more common in NigE than in BrE. This may be because imperatives in these varieties are often mitigated by honorifics and politeness markers such as *please*, as confirmed in the present study. Anderson (2009: 68) also notes that the imperative form is not considered rude in Akan as long as it occurs with *mi pa wʊ kyèw*, the Akan equivalent of *please*. Isingoma (2021: 18) also observes that in UgE, imperatives paired with appropriate mitigators, such as *please*, make such utterances polite requests, reflecting the influence of indigenous Ugandan languages.

Regarding the pragmatic functions of *please*, the findings of this study show that *please* performs many different interpersonal functions across the three AfEs, many of which have been identified in other English varieties such as BrE (Barron, 2008; Murphy and Felice, 2018; Murphy, 2025). However, in the AfE data, *please* also performs other functions such as mitigating warnings, claiming attention and marking interruptions, which have not been extensively discussed in previous studies. The findings show that, across all three varieties, *please* is most frequently used in mitigating instructions and requests, followed by its use in emphasising pleas and information. This is marginally distinct from what obtains in other world English varieties. For example, Islentyeva et al. (2023) identifies five senses in which *please* is used: making polite requests, followed by signalling urgency (pleas), conveying acceptance, expressing irony, and very rarely, mitigating instructions. However, the low frequency of *please* as a mitigator of instructions in their data may be a reflection of the fact that their study focused primarily on spoken discourse. By contrast, the AfE corpus data indicate that most instances of *please* used to mitigate instructions are found not only in spoken contexts such as business transactions and parliamentary debates, but also in written contexts, particularly business letters. Despite these distinctions, there are notable similarities between AfE varieties and other English varieties, particularly in the widespread use of *please* to mitigate requests (e.g. Wichmann, 2004). For instance, the high frequency of *please* in requests and pleas (urgency) observed in AfE varieties also aligns with the findings of Islentyeva et al. (2023).

In relation to the use of *please* across the diverse text categories in the three AfE varieties, there is notable variation in frequency. In NigE, *please* occurs more frequently in spoken texts than in written texts, while in GhE and UgE, *please* is more prevalent in written texts than in spoken texts. While the patterns for GhE and UgE correlate with findings for BrE (see Aijmer, 1996), NigE differs from BrE in showing a higher preference for *please* in spoken texts. This also supports the earlier notion that NigE is further along in Schneider's (2007) stage 4 than the other two varieties. The preponderance of *please* in NigE spoken texts can be linked to its frequent occurrence in ICE-NIG business transactions and parliamentary debates, both of which are settings in which formal politeness is required (see Aijmer, 1996: 166), and are public dialogues characterised by formal interactions and hierarchical structures. In these contexts, figures of authority – such as the chairperson in a business meeting (business transactions) and the Speaker of the National Assembly (parliamentary debates) – manage discourse and often mitigate their utterances with *please* in order to explicitly signal politeness when issuing instructions or making requests to ensure cooperation from other participants in the interaction.

Thus, it is possible that the very high frequency of *please* in ICE-NIG business transactions and parliamentary debates can be tied to the high frequency of requests in these text types. For instance, Gut and Unuabonah (2022) report that out of six text types examined in ICE-NIG (conversations, business transactions, broadcast discussions, broadcast interviews, business letters, and social letters), business transactions had the highest frequency of requests. Moreover, out of all the requests examined in their study, 67.9% were direct requests, making them more likely to be mitigated by *please*. The absence of *please* in ICE-GH business transactions may be tied to the low word count for this text type, as the spoken component of ICE-GH used for this study was incomplete (Huber and Dako, 2013).

One text type that consistently exhibits a high frequency of *please* across all three varieties is social letters. Social letters in these varieties are dominated by requests, a speech act that requires mitigators to reduce potential face threats (see Meierkord, 2016 for UgE and Gut and Unuabonah, 2022 for NigE). The frequent use of *please* in social letters can be attributed to its role in softening requests and enhancing politeness. For instance, Gut and Unuabonah (2022) report that social letters contain the second-highest frequency of requests among the six text types earlier listed. Out of 116 requests found in social letters in their study, 100 were direct requests, many of which would typically be mitigated by *please*. The current study further corroborates these findings, revealing that *please* is used to mitigate requests in more than half of its occurrences in NigE social letters (44 out of 83 instances). Similarly, *please* functions as a mitigator in 54.8% (40 out of 73 cases) of GhE and 48.6% (18 out of 37 instances) of UgE social letters. The use of *please* in mitigating requests highlights its function in enhancing interpersonal relationships among interactants who are well known to one another. Altogether, the frequency, structural patterns, and pragmatic functions of *please*, as well as its consistent presence in diverse text types, provide further evidence of the ongoing pragmatic nativisation observed in these three AfE varieties.

7 Conclusion

This paper has examined the use of *please* as a DPF in three AfE varieties – GhE, NigE, and UgE – in terms of its frequency, structural patterns, and pragmatic functions across different text types, drawing insights from postcolonial pragmatics and variational pragmatics. The results show both similarities and differences in how *please* is used in the three varieties. Specifically, *please* occurs more frequently in NigE than in GhE and UgE, while it occurs more

frequently with imperatives and is commonly positioned in the clause-initial position in all three varieties. The study also identifies pragmatic functions of *please* which have not been extensively discussed in previous research on other varieties of English, such as its use in mitigating warnings and claiming attention, and observes that *please* occurs most frequently in correspondences and public dialogues across all three varieties.

The study confirms that *please* plays a significant role in the nativisation of GhE, NigE, and UgE, underscoring the impact of indigenous African languages and cultures on these varieties. Additionally, it advances the understanding of pragmatic variation in the three AfE varieties, contributing to the broader field of contrastive pragmatics, since studying variation is a core form of contrastive analysis. However, the study is limited to analysing *please* as a DPF within these varieties, focusing solely on internal variables such as clause types, clause position, and text types, without considering other social factors central to variational pragmatics, such as ethnicity, age, and gender (Barron, 2021). Since most of the ICE corpora provide metadata on these variables, future studies may investigate their impact on the use of *please* in these varieties. Furthermore, this study did not explore the collocational patterns of *please* with other DPFs, as such co-occurrences were rare in the corpora, nor did it analyse the prosodic features of *please*, as done by Wichmann (2004). Thus, future studies could address this gap by investigating the prosodic features of *please* in these varieties, particularly using the recorded spoken texts available especially in ICE-NIG. Moreover, the study could be extended to other AfE varieties, such as Kenyan English and Tanzanian English. Given their shared cultural conceptualisations, these varieties may exhibit similar patterns in the use of *please*. Further research on *please* and other DPFs in other New Englishes may provide deeper insights into the ongoing process of pragmatic nativisation and stabilisation in postcolonial Englishes.

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