The diachrony of im/politeness in American and British movies (1930−2019)

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we use a relatively new source of data, the *Movie Corpus,* to explore the common stereotype that politeness standards keep falling. In this data, which contains transcripts of movies from 1930 to 2019, we trace a range of elements that have relatively clear default politeness or impoliteness values (e.g. *please*, *could you* and a range of title nouns versus swear words). And we introduce a terminological distinction between conduct politeness and etiquette politeness. The results suggest a complex picture of some "polite" expressions that are indeed declining (e.g. title nouns, *would you (please)*) while others are rising (e.g. *can you (please)*). Many "impolite" swear words have increased considerably over the last five decades. We carefully discuss the reliability of these results, which fully depend on the composition of the corpus and its consistency over time as well as on the reliability of the chosen elements as im/politeness indicators. We compare the results for American/Canadian and for British/Irish movies (following the distinction of the *Movie Corpus*), and we discuss the extent to which movies can be taken as indicators of language change in general.

1. Introduction

There appears to be a widespread consensus among cultural commentators, self-appointed etiquette authorities and public opinion that politeness standards have continuously fallen in living memory and that they have never been quite as bad as today.[1] And indeed, it seems all too easy to point out current examples of bad behaviour in public life that appear to provide convincing evidence of falling standards. The internet appears to be particularly prone to attract atrocious behaviour that we feel certain would have been unthinkable not so long ago. Judith Martin, an American columnist and etiquette authority, provides a particularly poignant example of this sentiment. In her peculiar style in which she refers to herself in the third person as "Miss Manners", she asserts, "Society cannot exist without etiquette, Miss Manners must overcome her modesty to admit. It never has, and until our own century, everybody knew that" (Martin 1996: 76). In her writings, she operates with a variety of terms, such as "civility", "politeness", "etiquette" and "manners", often using them more or less as

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synonyms. Her penname and the title of her book, *Miss Manners Rescues Civilization*, make it clear what the purpose of her crusade is. Civilization depends on good manners, and she is there to rescue it with her advice on how to behave.

However, irrespective of how much credence we want to give such claims about falling politeness standards, they are notoriously difficult to assess empirically. In the context of variational pragmatics (e.g. Haugh and Schneider 2012; Murphy and De Felice 2018; Culpeper and Gillings 2018), new tools have been developed to compare politeness across different varieties of English or to trace the development of politeness diachronically within one specific variety of English. Culpeper and Demmen (2011), for instance, trace the rise of negative politeness in the form of conventional indirect requests in the nineteenth century, and Jucker (2020: chapter 9) investigates the diachronic development of what he calls "non-imposition politeness" in American English of the nineteenth and twentieth century. In this contribution, we want to continue this line of research and assess some aspects of the diachronic development of politeness from the 1930s until today. For this investigation we use a data source that has recently become available for diachronic research of recent developments, i.e. the *Movie Corpus*, which contains fictional dialogues from movies from the 1930s to the 2010s. The corpus contains material from different varieties of English. By far the largest part derives from movies produced in the United States and Canada, which the corpus lumps together into one component. This is followed by movies from the United Kingdom and Ireland, which are also lumped together. We, therefore, focus on these two components. We do not claim, of course, that these components correspond to varieties of English that are internally coherent or that they are always consistently distinct from one another. But in spite of the limitations of the *Movie Corpus*, which we will discuss in more detail in Section 3.1 below, this corpus provides a unique data source for tracing diachronic developments across almost a century and differences across the two major corpus components of US/Canadian English on the one hand and UK/Irish English on the other.

In Section 2, we will contextualise our research in earlier work in variational pragmatics and related work on changes of politeness in British and American English, and we will introduce a distinction between conduct im/politeness and etiquette im/politeness. This is an important distinction because our investigation is concerned with the surface of how people perform politeness or impoliteness, i.e. etiquette im/politeness, which says very little about the underlying morality of behaviour, i.e. conduct im/politeness. After the discussion of the *Movie Corpus* in Section 3.1, we will introduce the diagnostics that we are using for our investigation in Section 3.2. Section 4 presents the results of our study, and Section 5, finally, discusses them in some detail. It is clear that simple shifts in the frequency of "polite" or "impolite" terms do not directly index similar shifts in polite or impolite behaviour. As we will show below, the relationship is more complex and more tentative.

2. Levels of politeness

For the purpose of this investigation, we wish to introduce a terminological distinction between two levels of im/politeness; conduct im/politeness and etiquette im/politeness. This distinction is related to the difference that Paternoster (2022) has described between conduct books and etiquette books. In fact, she describes three types of such books. Courtesy books deal with the manners of the ideal courtier in the context of religious and moral values, and they go back to the Renaissance period. Conduct books also go back to the Renaissance period, but they have a moralising focus. They are often addressed to children and deal with elementary civility. Etiquette books are more recent and date from the early nineteenth century. They deal with the social conventions of the upper class and tend to be free of moral implications. We use the distinction between conduct and etiquette in a similar way. Conduct im/politeness, here, refers to the underlying morality or moral order (Kádár 2017) of behaviour. It focuses on *what* people do and whether that is appropriate or not. Etiquette im/politeness, on the other hand, is concerned with the more superficial conventions. It focuses on *how* things are done, or more specifically, how utterances are formulated. From this perspective personal insults — in whatever form they are brought forward — may be considered a breach of conduct politeness while the formulation of a request either as a command ("Shut up!") or as a conventionally indirect question ("Would you mind lowering your voice a little?") would be an issue of etiquette politeness. Historically, this is an important distinction because it was in the eighteenth century that the term politeness changed from describing a behaviour in accordance with a good character and moral virtues to a description of pleasing behaviour that could also be used to disguise underlying motives of a less pleasing nature (Jucker 2020: Chapter 10). In Eelen's words, this form of politeness can be "an outward mask, an insincere performance delivered for the sake of displaying good manners" (2001: 36). Thus, the distinction also helps to understand the ambivalent nature of politeness. It can be seen as positive when it describes genuinely good behaviour, and it can be seen as negative when it hides less pleasing motives. It is a second-order distinction which we propose as an analytical tool that allows us to disentangle the underlying morality of behaviour from the surface forms of specific lexical and syntactic choices by the speakers.

But obviously, the two types of im/politeness are not always easy to disentangle, and in everyday usage the mixing of the two levels is often intentional. On a first-order level, as we have seen above in Miss Manner's diatribe against falling standards, etiquette and morality are inextricably linked. If your table manners are lacking and your choice of words is inappropriate, you must be a bad person. However, for analytical purposes, we distinguish between the two types and we are primarily concerned with the way politeness or impoliteness are being performed, hence with what we call etiquette im/politeness.

Thus, we do not want to draw any conclusions about changing levels of the underlying conduct im/politeness. Our results, therefore, will not really provide any straightforward answer to the question whether politeness standards have "fallen" or whether speakers of English are "less polite" than they were a few decades ago. Such everyday observations are the starting point for our investigation, but we clearly see the development as changing patterns of social conventions or as changing ways of performing etiquette politeness, rather than as a rise or fall in conduct politeness.

Much of the early work on politeness, such as Lakoff (1973, 1975), Leech (1983) or Brown and Levinson (1987), was concerned with surface forms of politeness and thus what we call etiquette politeness. Specific forms of conventional indirectness, for instance, were considered to be more polite than more direct formulations, such as imperatives. This work is now often referred to as the first wave of politeness theory (Grainger 2011, Culpeper 2011, Culpeper and Hardaker 2017, Jucker 2020). The second wave of politeness theories (led by Eelen 2001; Locher and Watts 2005) rejected the idea that specific surface forms could be assigned specific politeness values. The politeness or impoliteness of forms only emerges in specific situations and is subject to discursive negotiations by speakers and their addressees. The focus also shifted away from academic definitions of politeness or impoliteness, i.e. second-order concepts, to folk notions of im/politeness, i.e. first-order concepts. This move blurred the distinction between our notion of morality politeness and etiquette politeness because in public discourse, the distinction is regularly ignored.

Robin Lakoff (2003, 2005) took this public discourse as the starting point for her investigation of possibly changing levels of politeness in America. She observed widespread public worrying about "the growing incivility or 'coarsening' of political and other public discourse" (2003: 36). The particular areas on her list of such worries concern both aspects of what we call etiquette im/politeness and conduct im/politeness. The use of inappropriate designations for groups of people, public use of politically incorrect language, and the use of vitriolic language by high level politicians would fall into the former category while road rage and other forms of hostile behaviour, would be more likely to fall into the latter. In her analysis, she pointed out that the current discontent about the levels of behaviour was not new in the history of America, and she identified several periods of similar discussions of falling standards. In addition, she drew attention to the new groups of people, who, over the previous decades, had gained access to public discourse, from which she concluded that "a lot of what passes for bad behaviour may simply be non-middle-class behaviour" (Lakoff 2003: 42).

In an article published two years later, Lakoff (2005) continued her investigation of the kinds of behaviour singled out by commentators as examples of rising levels of rudeness or incivility. Here she added sexual coarseness in public contexts, violence in the media, flaming on the internet and the loss of polite conventions, such as "please", "thank you", "how are you" and similar expressions, to her earlier list. She identified several reasons for such developments, but in particular the erosion of the line between public and private life and the rise of camaraderie. She saw the U.S. as moving away from the conventional distance, non-intrusiveness and formality culture to one that valued informality and camaraderie. In terms of Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, this could be described as a shift from negative to positive politeness.

Leech (2014: 297) picks up on Lakoff's observation of an increase in camaraderie and interprets it as a minimization of the implication of distance both on the horizontal and the vertical scales of social power and social distance. He identifies a range of diagnostics that reflect this minimization tendency, for instance the decline of respectfully polite titles (e.g. "Mr.", "Mrs.", "Dr."), which are increasingly replaced by the use of given names, the increase of familiar greetings ("Hi" or "Hello") instead of the more formal "good morning" or "good evening", or the use of "Hi X" as a greeting in letters and email messages which increasingly replaces the more formal "Dear X". Thus, he focuses on what we call etiquette politeness, and indeed he argues that these developments should not be seen as an indication of a general decline of politeness, by which he presumably means what we call conduct politeness. The growth of camaraderie should be seen as a trend to reduce and eliminate vertical as well as horizontal distance in an increasingly egalitarian society in which everyone is supposed to be equal.

In order to trace such developments, it is necessary to establish a set of elements, or diagnostics, that somehow reflect the changing levels of politeness across time. In recent years such methods have been developed in the related field of contrastive politeness theory in which closely related English speaking cultures are being compared to each other. Inevitably, such diagnostics are surface elements and thus part of etiquette politeness. They are indicative of the ways in which politeness is being done, rather than as a direct indication of the underlying level of conduct politeness. It stands to reason that such elements that can be used as diagnostics across two, or more, contemporary cultures may also be useful in a diachronic comparison of different stages of the same variety or culture.

Murphy and De Felice (2018) in their comparison of American English and British English, focus on only one element, i.e. *please* in requests. On the basis of pragmatically tagged corpora of workplace emails, they analysed 675 requests in each variety, which provided empirical evidence for the common stereotype that *please* is more frequent in British English requests than in their American English counterparts. It is part of 55% of British requests but only 27% of American requests.

Culpeper and Gillings (2018) include a broad range of elements in their investigation, in which they compare English in the north of England with southern varieties in order to test the widespread stereotype of the friendly northerner. Their diagnostics cover three types of politeness; tentativeness and deference, which together cover Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of negative politeness, and solidarity, which corresponds to Brown and Levinson's positive politeness. Under the heading of tentativeness, they include *could you* and *please*, under deference the address terms *sir* and *madam* as well as the speech act formulae *thank you*, *thanks* and *ta*, and under the heading of solidarity the address terms *love* and *mate* and the speech act formulae *cheers*, *hello*, *hi*, *goodbye* and *bye* (Culpeper and Gillings 2018: 39). We will return to this list in Section 3.2 below. They had derived these diagnostics, which had to be corpus-searchable and reasonably frequent, from non-academic commentaries about politeness in the north and the south, and as a dataset they used a demographically annotated sample of the *British National Corpus 2014*. In the end, the investigation did not support the hypothesis of the friendly northerner. On the contrary, their results show slightly higher levels of deference politeness and solidarity politeness for the south than for the north, but they speculate that the different types of recordings for the north and the south could be a reason for these findings. It appears that the northern data includes fewer recordings of more formal situations, which could have led to the slightly lower overall levels of politeness.

Diachronic investigations into changing levels of politeness have generally focused on what has variably been called negative politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987; Culpeper and Demmen 2011), tentativeness politeness (Culpeper and Gillings 2018) or non-imposition politeness (Jucker 2012, 2020). Today, requests formulated as tentative questions are often taken to be stereotypical and prototypical signs of politeness. But it has long been recognised that such forms are relatively recent. Kopytko (1995: 531) noted their scarcity in Shakespeare's plays in contrast to the dominating instances of positive politeness. Culpeper and Archer (2008) in their investigation of requests in late Early Modern English (1640—1760) also noted a very low number of instances of conventional indirectness. Requests in their data were overwhelmingly formulated as imperatives, explicit performatives or obligation statements (2008: 71). Culpeper and Demmen (2011) focus on the nineteenth century, where they find the conventional indirect requests so typical of Present-day English still to be rare. They speculate that a more substantial rise of such requests must have taken place after 1900 (Culpeper and Demmen 2011: 75). Jucker (2020: Chapter 9) used the *Corpus of Historical American English* as a database to investigate the development of non-imposition politeness throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He notes that *please* as an Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID) for requests was rare at the beginning of the nineteenth century and if it occurred in requests it was part of the phrase *if you please*. It reached the present-day levels only after the Second World War (Jucker 2020: 171). A similar trajectory obtains for the three conventionally indirect requests *could you*, *can you* and *would you*, which show a combined frequency of 10 instances per million words in the early nineteenth century. This rises slowly until the early twentieth century, when it suddenly more or less doubles after the Second World War and reaches a level of 35 instances per million words in the most recent period (Jucker 2020: 173). However, he also provides evidence that this development is not irreversible. In fact, in the last few decades starting from the 1980s, *would you* seems to have started a rather significant decline in frequency.

The late rise of conventionally indirect requests at least in American English may appear to be surprising given the fact that already the earliest politeness researchers (e.g. Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987) described them as typical for English. But the indications of their recent demise are equally noteworthy. They provide some additional evidence for Lakoff's (2003, 2005) supposition of the recent rise of camaraderie politeness which increasingly replaces negative politeness.

Against this background, this paper wants to trace one particular aspect of the post-WW2 development of politeness and impoliteness in some more detail. The *Corpus of Historical American English* consists of written English. Spoken English only occurs in the form of reported speech. The *Movie Corpus*, as we will show in more detail in Section 3.1, consists entirely of spoken language, and it focuses on the nine decades from just before the Second World War to the 2010s, and thus provides a wealth of valuable data for the period that we are interested in, and in addition it also allows a comparison of the development of US/Canadian with British/Irish English.

3. Data and method

3.1. The Movie Corpus

The *Movie Corpus* is one of two large corpora of diachronic data from telecinematic fiction that have recently been released by Davies on his corpus website https://www.english-corpora.org (Davies 2021). The corpus includes just under 200 million words of subtitles from films released from the 1930s to the 2010s. It is split into three regional components and a miscellaneous component. The regional components lump together films from the US and Canada, from the UK and Ireland, and from Australia and New Zealand (see Table 1). The amount of data that is included varies across periods and components. For the early periods, relatively little data is included for Australian and New Zealand English, which is why we focus on the American (US/CAN) and the European (UK/IE) components in this study (91.3% of the entire corpus). Searches restricted to films of only one national origin are not possible in the *Movie Corpus*.

Table 1
Data in the *Movie Corpus* (https://www.english-corpora.org/movies, 11 January 2022).

	US/CA	UK/IE	AU/NZ	Misc	TOTAL
1930s	6,013,722	445,980	2245	104,255	6,566,202
1940s	8,679,722	1,077,429	–	51,151	9,808,302
1950s	8,570,819	1,826,174	21,777	197,173	10,615,943
1960s	5,851,067	2,687,175	6594	557,976	9,102,812
1970s	6,972,688	2,060,309	112,715	958,968	10,104,680
1980s	10,739,129	2,153,349	308,640	917,461	14,118,579
1990s	19,259,078	2,983,322	384,607	1,986,577	24,613,584
2000s	38,572,824	6,970,252	793,610	4,893,749	51,230,435
2010s	48,649,187	8,705,479	1,337,876	4,626,223	63,318,765
TOTAL	153,308,236	28,909,469	2,968,064	14,293,533	**199,479,302**

Together with the *TV Corpus* — a second corpus of subtitle data — the *Movie Corpus* is a resource for studying speech-related language from a diachronic perspective that is unparalleled in size. The large amount of data that is included in the corpus makes it possible to trace changes of spoken language phenomena, even if they are not very frequent. The time-depth of the corpus is unique, too. There is no other corpus to date that includes data from spoken language that covers the entire period from the 1930s to today. Nor is it very likely that many other large resources of spoken language will ever become available that range further back in time, given the limited amount of spoken language recordings that exist from that time (see Jucker and Landert 2015). Thus, as far as size and depth are concerned, the *Movie Corpus* is a unique and valuable source for diachronic studies in spite of some inherent limitations that we will briefly outline below.

We refer to the *Movie Corpus* as a corpus containing spoken language, but the nature of the data requires some further discussion. The data included in the *Movie Corpus* consists of movie subtitles that were downloaded from the website OpenSubtitles.org (Davies 2021: 13–15). Movie subtitles are a type of speech-related language; they are written representations of movie dialogues, which in turn are instances of scripted and performed spoken language. (Davies 2021: 34) argues that subtitle corpora model conversational language, while being far less time-consuming and expensive to create than corpora containing spontaneous conversation. However, subtitles of fictional language differ from spontaneous conversation in some crucial ways. Fictional language is not a straightforward, faithful representation of non-fictional language (see, e.g. Bublitz 2017; Planchenault 2017), and subtitles do not have the same purpose or quality as careful linguistic transcriptions (see e.g. Guillot 2017, 2019). Let us take these two aspects in turn.

Movies often depict events and scenes that are set in different historical periods and in different cultures, and some of the depicted characters may use varieties that deviate from the national component to which the movie was assigned, or they may even speak foreign languages. Individual movies differ in the ways in which they try to evoke such linguistic variation. While in some movies actors use a standard English variety even if they depict a character speaking a historical or foreign language, other movies add some flavour of the historical or foreign variety to make it recognisable for the audience without impeding the understandability. Or they may opt for higher linguistic accuracy even at the expense of understandability (see Locher and Jucker 2021: Chapter 7). The individual components of the *Movie Corpus* should not be expected to conform to a — perhaps somewhat idealised idea of — coherent population of speakers with more or less identical demographics. Our analysis of this data is based on the assumption that in general the linguistic choices in a movie are mostly a reflection of the time of the production of the movie rather than an accurate account of the linguistic realities of the depicted worlds. Historical movies or movies set in different cultures may, of course, introduce some "noise" into the data. With too much noise some developments might even get blurred, but it is unlikely that such noise would reveal some spurious developments.[2]

Moreover, subtitles should not be expected to have the same level of accuracy as a linguistic transcription. Because of the space restrictions, subtitles often present a condensed version of the spoken dialogue, so that they fit on the screen and that viewers have enough time to read them. According to Guillot (2019), subtitles often skip orality features, like hesitation phenomena and discourse markers, and "greetings, leave-takings and other pragmatic features of everyday communicative practices and verbally enacted phenomena like politeness tend to be the first to go as non-essential when space is at a premium" (2019: 37). Thus, subtitles are not an exact transcription of the spoken dialogues in films, but they are still written representations of language that was realised in the spoken mode.

For diachronic studies, it is also important to take into account that subtitling practices have changed over time. In the early days of subtitling, subtitles tended to be much more reduced compared to today, when new technological developments offer more support for displaying longer and faster subtitles (see O'Sullivan and Cornu 2019). In the *Movie Corpus*, many subtitles of older films have been compiled in more recent periods, which reduces the effect of the technological developments, but reduction and space restrictions may still affect the early periods somewhat more than the more recent periods.

In addition to these problems and limitations there are also a number of technical issues that impact the value of the data. The quality of the subtitles, for instance, varies greatly. Opensubtitles.org — the website from which the subtitles in the *Movie Corpus* originate — is a platform that consists of user-generated subtitles. Users can create accounts and upload their own subtitles to share with other users. The subtitles can be created in any number of ways: through manual transcription of the spoken dialogues, through Optical Character Recognition of subtitles in video files (Davies 2021: 13; Lison and Tiedemann 2016: 926), or through automatic translations of subtitles from other languages. There is no editing and no quality check on the platform, apart from a user-voting system, which is a system that works best for very popular movies. As a consequence, the subtitles that are uploaded to the platform include a wide range of quality. At the lower end of the scale, there are subtitles that are automatically translated from other languages, which are ungrammatical and unidiomatic, and which provide a poor representation of the spoken dialogues in the movies. In our analysis, we observed such instances especially

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[2] Unfortunately, it is technically not possible to filter the *Movie Corpus* for certain genres or to exclude movies that depict foreign or historically distant worlds.

for the data from the early decades in the corpus. We will present some examples in Section 4 and discuss how these affect our findings.

Another problem that we observed repeatedly, especially for the early decades of the corpus data, concerns subtitle files with incorrect metadata, such as movie title and release date. For instance, one of the earliest movies in the corpus appears to be *Goodbye to All That*, which is listed in IMDb as a 9-min-long Musical film, produced in the UK and released in 1930. This is the metainformation included in the *Movie Corpus*. However, when looking at the data, it turns out that the subtitles belong to Season 2, Episode 5 of the TV Series *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, which was produced in the US and released in 2008. The episode is entitled "Goodbye to All That", like the 1930 film, and the subtitle file must have been associated with the wrong metainformation.[3] When working with the corpus, this means that the classification into decades is not entirely reliable. However, such errors are more likely to even out differences rather than to enhance them because if some individual features are randomly transposed in the corpus, they are more likely to move from periods when they are frequent to periods when they are not than the other way round. This makes it necessary to take a closer look at the findings in order to assess the role of data errors. We will discuss this and similar data issues in more detail with respect to our results for the diagnostics with impolite default values in Section 4.2.

3.2. Im/politeness diagnostics

The list of diagnostics that we use in our investigation of the changing ways in which politeness and impoliteness are performed in the *Movie Corpus* is based on the lists used by Culpeper and Gillings (2018) and Jucker (2020). However, Culpeper and Gillings focus exclusively on politeness diagnostics, and Jucker (2020) further restricts the set to diagnostics for non-imposition politeness. Here we add some obvious candidates with impoliteness values. The diagnostics, if they are to be useful in such an investigation, must fulfil a number of conditions.

- They must have relatively clear default values as either polite or impolite terms.
- They must be easily retrievable with reasonably good precision
- They must be reasonably frequent

The first of these conditions is, of course, the most problematic one (Culpeper and Gillings 2018: 36–7). Expressions such as *please* or *thank you* are, perhaps, the most prototypical manifestations of politeness. They are sometimes even called the magic words by parents who try to teach their children politeness. But it is clear that often enough, they are used ironically or sarcastically. Thus, we follow a third wave approach to im/politeness (e.g. Mills 2017; Culpeper and Hardaker 2017; Culpeper and Gillings 2018; Jucker 2020). This approach recognises both a certain level of flexibility and context-dependence but also a certain level of conventionalisation of specific linguistic elements. Mills, for instance, argues that

> Politeness can be seen as a set of enregistered forms, whose meaning is not completely fixed, but yet which have a certain degree of conventionalisation; politeness can thus be seen as a set of resources which individuals can draw on and modify in interaction (Mills 2017: 2).

The second bullet point may also be problematic because it restricts the number of elements that can be investigated. It is plausible to assume that modals, such as *could*, *would* and *might* are often involved in the formulation of non-imposition politeness, as extract (1) clearly shows.

(1) So I would appreciate it if one of you could come with me while I conduct my examination. (US, 2013, Bering Sea Beast)[4]

Here, *could* is clearly used to express non-imposition, but a search for *could* on its own retrieves far too many hits that have nothing to do with non-imposition. For this reason, it is necessary to use more restrictive phrases, e.g. *could you* or *would you*, or combine phrases in a collocation search with *please*. Other combinations, such as *can I, could I, you could*, etc. are of course also occasionally used in non-imposition requests, but they have a very low precision and are, therefore, not practicable as diagnostics in our investigation. Thus, our list of diagnostics is based on the lists used by Culpeper and Gillings (2018: 39) and

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[3] This is a mistake that must have happened on Opensubtitles.org. At the time of writing this article, the file was still accessible with the wrong metainformation on Opensubtitles.org: https://www.opensubtitles.org/en/subtitles/3547424/goodbye-to-all-that-en (last accessed 29/1/22).

[4] All examples are retrieved from the *Movie Corpus* at https://www.english-corpora.org/movies/unless otherwise indicated.

Jucker (2020: chapter 9) and our own experimental searches with which we determined the items with a relatively good precision. They are listed in Table 2.

To compile a list of terms with impolite meanings is perhaps somewhat more difficult. For practical reasons, we focus on swear words and ignore other possible expressions and constructions. Swear words are, by definition, terms that have the potential to offend, even if they are regularly used in situations in which they do not offend (see Beers Fägersten 2012: 3). There are many different ways of establishing sets of swear words and of defining them (see, for instance, Beers Fägersten 2012; Lutzky and Kehoe 2016; Love 2021). We consulted the *Oxford English Dictionary* and searched for terms with a usage label 'coarse slang' or 'curse'. This retrieved 387 and 118 hits respectively. From these two lists, we manually excluded all terms that have a widespread neutral homonym (e.g. *deal*, *dog*, *finger*, *fist*). We excluded terms that are used as metapragmatic labels (e.g. *curse*, *expletive*, *denounce*, *maledict*, *swear*). We also excluded rare terms for which the OED indicates a frequency band of lower than 4 (out of 8). The resulting list of 14 terms is also given in Table 2.[5]

Table 2
List of diagnostics.

Formulaic im/politeness expression	Im/politeness type
Please	Non-imposition
Could you (*)_v*	
Collocation search (L3-R6)	
Can you (*please*)	
Could you (*please*)	
Would you (*please*)	
Would you mind	
Titles	Deference
Sir, Madam, Dr, Lord, Lady	
Mr, Miss, Ms, Mrs	
Captain, Colonel, Major	
Uncle, Aunt	
Thank you/thanks	
Pardon	
Bullshit, cunt, cuss, damn, damned, dollop, fart, fuck, fucking, knob, motherfucker, piss, shit, shitty	Swear words, taboo expressions, cursing

The last bullet point is perhaps the least problematic. Elements with a very low frequency may be difficult to trace diachronically and their presence or absence at a particular point in time might be a matter of chance, but it might be difficult to specify a clear-cut cut-off point. For reasons of space, we present only a selection of the results obtained from the lists in Table 2. We give preference to those elements that show clear diachronic tendencies in one direction or the other. We also further reduce the list of swear words to terms with more than 50 instances per million words in at least one decade. The diachronic developments were tested for statistical significance with a Mann−Kendall test for monotonic non-linear timeline developments. We calculated the results in R (significance level: $p < 0.05$). We comment on statistical significance below in the few cases in which the results require further elaboration. The complete results can be found in the appendix.

4. Results

4.1. Polite default values

The first group of diagnostics we looked at were expressions with a polite default value that are often used to express non-imposition politeness. The most frequent of these diagnostics is *please*. Figs. 1 and 2 present the distribution of all instances of *please* tagged as an adverb in the US/CAN and the UK/IE data, respectively. The results show a slight decline between the 1960s and the 2000s in the US/CAN data, and an even clearer decline between the 1950s and the 2010s for the UK/IE data. For the 1990s to the 2010s, there is little change in both data sets. Overall, these developments are not very marked, and should be interpreted with caution, even if the results from the Mann−Kendall test indicate that there is indeed a statistically significant (non-linear) decline. However, as we will show below, our results repeatedly show changes that appear to initiate around the 1960s, which might indeed be a relevant decade for changes affecting etiquette politeness.

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[5] Our list includes both items that Stenström (2017: 158) calls swear words and abuses. According to her distinction, swear words express attitudes and feelings and are not directed to another person (e.g. *bullshit*, *damn*, *fuck*) while abuses are used directly to or for a person (e.g. *cunt*, *motherfucker*). In our list, the distinction is not always clear-cut (Compare, for instance, "No one here knows shit", US/CA, 2014, A Bit of Bad Luck, versus "Shut up, you little shit." US/CA, 1995, Four Rooms).
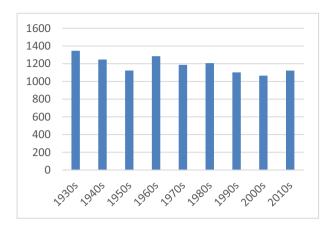
Fig. 1. The adverb *please* in the US/CAN section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.
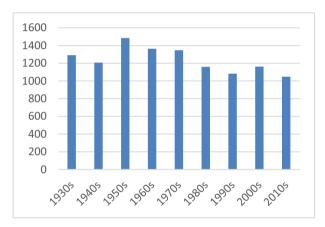

Fig. 2. The adverb *please* in the UK/IE section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.

Our diagnostics of non-imposition politeness further included the search patterns *could you, can you* and *would you.* In order to further increase the precision of our queries, we restricted the search to instances that collocate with *please* (span L3—R6). Figs. 3 and 4 present the results of the three search patterns for US/CAN and UK/IE.
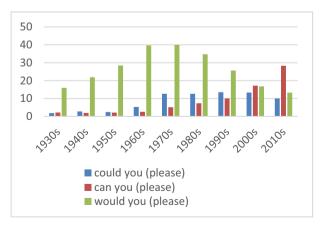

Fig. 3. The patterns *could you, can you* and *would you*, collocating with *please* (L3-R6) in the US/CAN section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.
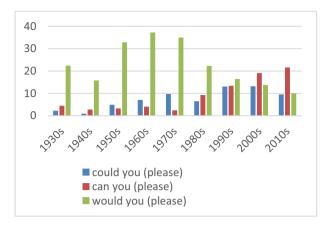
Fig. 4. The patterns *could you, can you* and *would you*, collocating with *please* (L3-R6) in the UK/IE section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.

In both varieties, *would you* starts out as the most frequent pattern, and it further increases until the 1960s/1970s, where it starts to drop quite drastically.[6] In the 2010s, its frequency is lower in both datasets than at the beginning of the period. The drop of *would you* co-occurs with a rise of the other two patterns, *could you* and *can you*. The pattern *could you* is the first to increase, starting roughly in the 1970s, but the trend is first halted around the turn of the millennium, and then even reversed in the final decade under investigation.[7] The final pattern, *can you*, starts to increase slightly later, but then grows even more quickly and overtakes both other patterns by the 2010s.

In terms of directness, the three expressions form a cline with *would you* being the least direct expression, followed by *could you*, and with *can you* being the most direct one. The development we can see here is the gradual replacement of the indirect *would you* with the more direct *can you*. Thus, in addition to the overall decline of non-imposition politeness, the expressions within this group also become more direct — at least for the group of expressions we studied here. Again, the 1960s mark a turning point, as they are the decade in which *would you* stops its increase and then begins to become less frequent.

As an indicator of the development of deference politeness, we looked at the frequency of title nouns. In order to restrict, our hits to instances that were used as titles, we included only instances that were tagged as NNB, a tag that is applied to title nouns preceding names. In this way, we excluded common noun uses of the terms, such as in Examples 2 to 4 below. For *Sir* and *Madam,* which are often used without names and for which common noun uses are less frequent, we did not restrict the query.

(2) I thank the *Lord* for you. (US, 2005, "Son of the Mask")
(3) My *uncle* and *aunt* would have a fit if they could see me now. (US, 1933, "Gambling Ship")
(4) Well, to save the reputation of the boat… the *captain* can marry us. (US, 1931, "Indiscreet")

We included all title nouns that were among the 10 most frequent title nouns in the US/CAN or the UK/IE data. Our analysis covered different groups of title nouns: title nouns that are typically associated with respect and high social status (*Sir, Madam, Lord, Lady*), title nouns that reflect academic degrees and formal ranks (*Dr, Captain, Colonel, Major*), title nouns that express family relationships (*Aunt, Uncle*) and more neutral title nouns (*Ms, Mrs, Miss, Mr*).

All these groups of title nouns show a clear downward trend (see Figs. 5—14). The only form that increases in frequency between the 1930s and the 2010s is the form *Ms*,[8] which increasingly replaces the form *Miss,* the form that shows one of the strongest declines. As the overview in Figs. 5 and 6 shows, the 1960s once again mark the turning point in the US/CAN data, after which the frequency of title nouns decreases rapidly. In the UK/IE data, the 1950s include a much higher number of the titles *Sir, Mr, Captain* and *Dr* than the decades before and after, so that the turning point appears to be earlier here. However, it is possible that the higher frequency of title nouns in the 1950s is due to data bias. The UK/IE section includes 446 instances of *Captain* as a title noun in the 1950s. However, the instances are very unevenly distributed across the roughly 220 movies included in this section of the data: 329 instances (74%) occur in only 16 movies, and the top 9 movies include more than half of all instances (see Table 3). Looking at the list of movies, it appears that a small number of military and adventure movies lead to an overall increase of *Captain* in this section of the data. A similar effect can be observed for the military title noun *Major,* which is markedly higher in the UK/IE data from the 1990s than in the other periods (see Fig. 12). A closer look at the data reveals that many instances of these terms occur in different episodes of the miniseries *Major Sharpe*, a series that presents a fictionalised account of the Napoleonic Wars, featuring the fictional character Richard Sharpe. Of all the hits of

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[6] The increase is statistically significant only for the US/CAN data, but the subsequent decline is statistically significant for both varieties.
[7] The reversal of the pattern could not be tested for statistical significance, due to the lack of data points.
[8] The increase is statistically significant for the period 1960s—2010s in the US data only.

Major in the UK/IE data from the 1990s, 88% occur within this miniseries. Thus, the UK/IE data appears to be subject to rather strong genre effects, especially with respect to more specialised types of title nouns.

Table 3
Number of instances of *Captain* as a title noun in sixteen UK/IE movies from the 1950s.

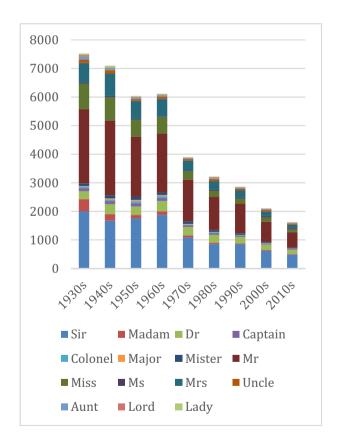| Movie	Instances of *Captain* as a title noun
The Iron Petticoat	51
The Wreck of the Mary Deare	37
Captain Horatio Hornblower	26
Moby Dick	24
North West Frontier	21
Treasure Island	20
Pursuit of the Graf Spee	19
The House of the Seven Hawks	19
Our Man in Havanna	17
Outcast of the Islands	17
Breakout	14
The Pickwick Papers	14
Night Ambush	13
The Key	13
All at Sea	12
The Weapon	12
Total	**329 (of 446)**

Fig. 5. Overview of title nouns in the US/CAN section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.
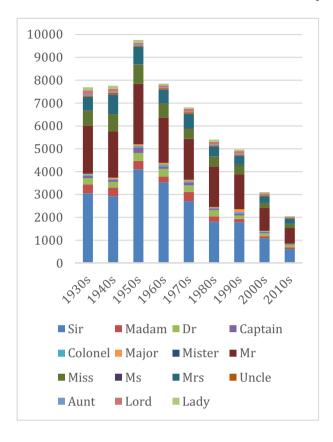
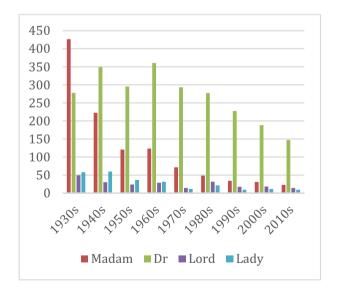**Fig. 6.** Overview of title nouns in the UK/IE section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.

Fig. 7. *Madam, Dr, Lord* and *Lady* in the US/CAN section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.
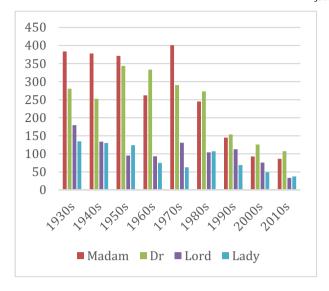
Fig. 8. *Madam, Dr, Lord* and *Lady* in the UK/IE section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.

Fig. 9. *Mr, Miss, Ms* and *Mrs* in the US/CAN section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.
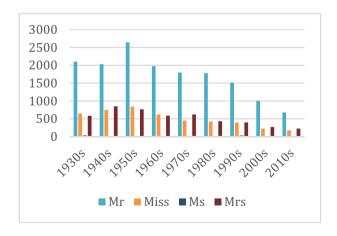

Fig. 10. *Mr, Miss, Ms* and *Mrs* in the UK/IE section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.
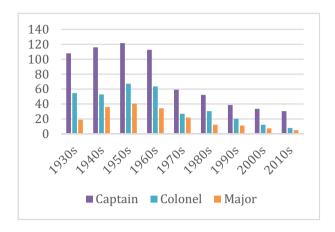
Fig. 11. Military titles in the US/CAN section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.
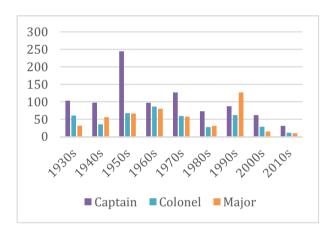

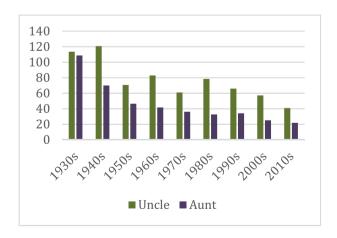**Fig. 12.** Military titles in the UK/IE section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.

Fig. 13. *Uncle* and *Aunt* as title nouns in the US/CAN section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.
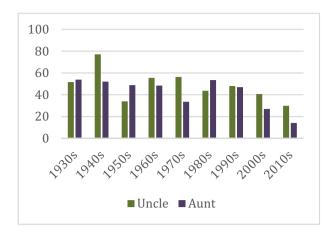
Fig. 14. *Uncle* and *Aunt* as title nouns in the UK/IE section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.

Thus, at least as far as the US/CAN data is concerned, the development of title nouns as an indicator of deference politeness shows similar tendencies to our results for non-imposition politeness: an overall downward trend, with a turning point around the 1960s for many diagnostics. For the UK/IE data, similar tendencies can be observed, but less clearly, which may, at least in part, be due to genre effects and biases in the data.[9]

4.2. Impolite default values

Figs. 15 and 16 show the development of the diagnostics with impolite default value that we included. The search terms consist of the most frequent terms in each variety, only including terms with more than 50 instances per million words for at least one decade (see Section 3.2). As a consequence, the set of terms differs slightly between the two varieties.
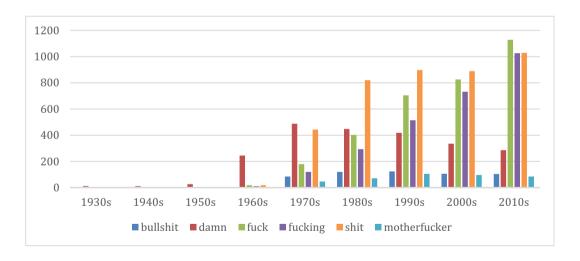

Fig. 15. Swear words in the US/CAN section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.

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[9] In the UK/IE data, the decline in title nouns is not statistically significant for *Colonel, Major, Ms* and *Uncle*. All the other title nouns show a statistically significant decline.
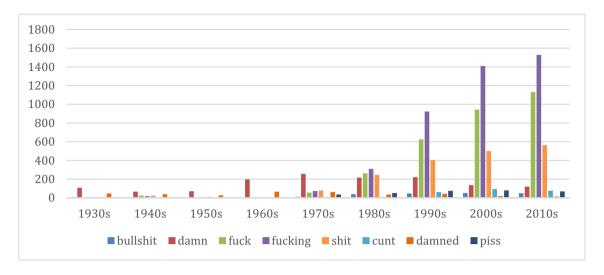
Fig. 16. Swear words in the UK/IE section of the *Movie Corpus*, instances per million words.

As these results show, there is a massive increase of our search terms. Up to the 1960s, hardly any instances can be found at all. The first expression that occurs more regularly is *damn*, and its use increases markedly in the 1960s and 1970s. After that, it slowly decreases.[10] Following *damn*, other expressions increase in frequency, starting in the 1970s and 1980s. In both varieties, *fuck, fucking* and *shit* become by far the most common expressions by the end of the period, with some differences in their relative distribution. It is plausible to assume that this increase in frequency lead to a corresponding weakening of these terms. Stenström (2017: 175) uses the term "semantic bleaching" to refer to the effect of the overuse of specific swear words in her analysis of English and Spanish teenage talk (see also Murphy 2009: 97).

There are a few points that require elaboration with respect to the almost complete absence of impoliteness diagnostics in the early decades. First, there are regulatory factors involved here. Up to the 1960s, Hollywood's Motion Picture Production Code, also called Hays Code, prevented film producers from including swear words and taboo language in their films. Between 1966 and 1968, the Hays Code was replaced by a new rating system and in 1972, the age-based rating system was introduced, which forms the basis of today's regulations (Geltzer 2015: 203–205). This age-based rating system made it possible to include such language in movies for an older audience. Thus, the suddenness of the increase is due to a formal policy change, rather than more general social or linguistic developments. Nevertheless, social aspects certainly played a role in the decision of changing regulations, and the changing use of language in movies is likely to have affected language use more generally.

Another point that requires more attention is the fact that our results still include instances of words that would have been restricted by the Hays Code even before it was abolished. There are two explanations for this. First, the Hays Code did not lead to a complete censorship and the inclusion of "a swear word could be negotiated" (Geltzer 2015: 202). As an example, Geltzer (2015: 202) cites Clark Gable's line "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). In our data, *damn* is the most frequent expression during the period of the Hays Code and it appears that it might have been the one term film producers could have gotten away with. This could both explain its massive increase after the Hays Code was abolished, as well as its later replacement: as the default swear word in films, it signalled the rise of more freedom in language use, but was soon replaced by even stronger expressions. Comparisons with other types of data would be needed to see to what extent the development of *damn* in the *Movie Corpus* is specific to the language of movies, or whether similar developments could also be found in other contexts.

The second explanation of why swear words were found in the earliest decades of our data leads back to the data problems that we mentioned in Section 3.1. When looking at our hits, we realised that many of the earliest instances did not look genuine, in one way or another. Since the manual verification of individual instances is very time consuming, we were not able to investigate all hits. However, we decided to search for the earliest instance of *fuck* for which we could verify that it was actually used in the spoken movie dialogue.

Since we had discovered that the classification of regional varieties in the *Movie Corpus* was not very reliable for the earliest decades, we searched for *fuck* in the entire corpus. For the first three decades, 1930s–1950s, the search resulted in a total of 131 instances. We looked at all these instances in detail. First, we discovered that in some cases, the file boundaries in

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[10] The decline of *damn* is statistically significant for the period 1970s–2010s in the US/CAN data. In the UK/IE data, the development is not statistically significant.

the *Movie Corpus* appear to be imprecise. When looking at the context in which *fuck* was used, we saw that it appeared at the very beginning of a new subtitle file. The metainformation leading to the retrieval of the hit was based on the previous file, though, and since the files in the *Movie Corpus* are not ordered chronologically, that often meant that the file in which we found *fuck* was much more recent. Of the 131 instances up to the 1950s, 11 were due to this error.

For the remaining instances, we checked whether the metainformation of the subtitle file was correct. For this, we downloaded the original subtitle file from Opensubtitles.org, verified that it was the same file included in the *Movie Corpus* in which we found *fuck*, and checked the content of the complete subtitle file against the information about the film provided on the International Movie Database (IMDb). We compared character names, plot and quotes from the film and when we thought that the two did not match, we searched for the correct film, which, in most cases, was a more recent film or TV series episode with a similar name. Almost all of the remaining instances of *fuck* up to the 1950s could be excluded in this way. For one film, *Showdown at Abilene* (1956), three instances of *fuck* in the subtitles turned out not to have been used in the film dialogue when we checked the passage in the actual film. We assume that the subtitles were automatically translated back to English from subtitles in another language. In the end, none of the 131 instances could be verified.

We extended our analysis to the 1960s, and here we could find some instances. The earliest verified instances that we found are used in the 1966 film *Chelsea Girls*, an experimental film by Paul Morrissey and Andy Warhol, which includes various instances of *fuck*, alongside other swear words and taboo language. We found a range of other films from 1967 to 1969 which include *fuck*. Interestingly, they all appear to be (semi or mock) documentaries and most of them are described as "experimental" in film literature. Thus, the role of film genres in the spread of forms could be an interesting topic for further research.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have looked at the frequency development of a range of diagnostics which we claim to have relatively clear default politeness or impoliteness values. As we have repeatedly pointed out, all of these diagnostics take their actual politeness or impoliteness value from the actual context in which they occur. They may be used ironically or sarcastically, which may turn polite into impolite and vice versa. Our investigation rests on the assumption that such usages tend to be marked, and therefore increases or decreases in their frequency may provide rough proxies to changes in etiquette im/politeness. This focus on surface expressions does not allow any far-reaching conclusions about the underlying conduct or morality of what people do to each other. Our focus has not been on what people do with language, but on how they do it. Corpus linguistic tools, or linguistic tools in general, allow us to carefully investigate the specific properties of people's utterances, but not the morality of their actions. In other words, our results do not tell us whether fictional characters in today's movies are kinder or less kind towards each other than characters in the early movies back in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. It only tells us something about how they talked to each other, and what kind of expressions they used.

But even within these qualifications, our results need to be treated with care. Our investigations presented above indicate an overall decrease of diagnostics with a polite default value and a marked increase of diagnostics with an impolite default value. In addition, the 1960s are the decade when many of these changes appear to start or accelerate. If we take our findings as an indication of the development of etiquette politeness, we could conclude that politeness conventions have indeed changed over the last 90 years. However, this interpretation depends on three conditions before conclusions can be drawn.

- our results reflect the language use in movies
- the language use in movies reflects the language use in non-fictional domains
- a change in frequency of our diagnostic elements reflects a change in etiquette politeness.

With respect to the first of these points, we have already discussed several shortcomings of the *Movie Corpus*, such as mistakes in the metainformation of subtitle files, the absence of quality control of the included subtitles, and misidentification of file boundaries. All these problems mean that any results based on the *Movie Corpus* need to be interpreted with caution. However, most of the problems we identified with the corpus will lead to presenting differences in the data as less pronounced than they actually are. Given that the trends that we found are rather clear, we can assume that film subtitles have indeed undergone rather marked changes over the last 90 years.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect with respect to the data is the question to what extent technological changes have affected the way in which subtitles relate to the spoken language used in movies. If subtitles from the early decades relate to the spoken language of movies in fundamentally different ways than the subtitles in the later decades, then this could have an effect on our results. However, when looking at the data in the *Movie Corpus* more closely, it turned out that many of the subtitles were created much later than the film, so that this effect is likely to be less pronounced than one might think. Moreover, most of the expressions we looked at are not among those most likely to be skipped for space reasons, such as hesitation phenomena and discourse markers. The expression that could be skipped most easily is *please*, but if this was skipped in subtitles from early movies, then again the trend we observed — the decrease in the use of *please* — would be even more pronounced. Overall, we conclude that it is, indeed, very likely that the language in movies has changed since the 1930s.

The second point concerns the relationship between the language of movies and the language in other domains (for an insightful study on the connection between the language of television and language change in general see Stuart-Smith et al. 2013 on recent changes in Glaswegian vernacular). In other words, what can we learn from our results about the development of politeness beyond movies? It is clear that language in movies fulfils functions that are specific to fiction. It is performed by actors for an audience, who is assumed to watch movies for entertainment and emotional engagement. This certainly affects how language is used and, thus, we cannot expect the use of etiquette politeness in movies to be exactly the same as in non-fictional interaction. However, the way in which politeness is shown in movies is not independent from social and cultural developments either. The important question is whether and how much the relation between language in movies and in non-fictional interactions has changed over time. While there have been linguistic studies on the relationship between language in TV series and spontaneous conversation in recent times (e.g. Quaglio 2009), the diachronic development has not been investigated so far. However, there are various factors that suggest that this relationship has indeed changed. For instance, there are regulatory developments, such as the introduction of the age-rating system, as we discussed in Section 4.2. Other changes may have affected the content of movies, leading to different types and representations of characters by using different politeness forms. Genre diversification is another factor. Over time, movies have become stylistically more diverse, which is likely to result in more diversity in the use of politeness conventions. Moreover, the role of movies in society has changed since the 1930s. Watching movies has become a much more common activity over the course of the twentieth century and it is possible that this has led to an overall change in the perception of movies as a less formal artefact, which could then lead to style shifts in the language of movies. It is possible that, on average, older movies were more formal in style and, thus, more distant from spontaneous language use than more recent movies. This would mean that our results do not reflect overall change in language use but the changing role of movies as cultural artefacts. All these considerations lead us to conclude that movies reflect language change in a somewhat indirect way.

The final point addresses the role of our diagnostic elements for the assessment of changes in etiquette politeness. Again, there are various aspects that need to be considered. First of all, not all instances of an expression are interpreted with its default meaning. For instance, there are ironic uses of polite expressions, and, as pointed out above, swear words can be impolite in some contexts but not in others. Most importantly for the purposes of our study, the default values of polite and impolite expressions do not remain constant over time. Terms receive their polite or impolite default value through the contexts in which they are typically used. If an impolite term spreads from a less formal to a more formal context and becomes more frequent there, it loses its impolite default value over time. It is subject to semantic bleaching (Stenström 2017: 175). In other words, the degree of formality of the context and the (im)politeness value of an expression depend on each other, and they are also affected by broader social and cultural factors, such as changing genre expectations. This means that the default values assigned to certain expressions undergo change over time. By using a term more frequently, its default value undergoes change. Thus, a given title noun like *Sir*, a non-imposition expression like *please* and a swear word like *damn* do not have the same default value in the 1930s as in the 2010s.

Therefore, we cannot even claim with certainty that what we are witnessing are clear changes in the level of etiquette politeness. It is far more likely that we are witnessing changes of the specific forms that etiquette politeness takes. Evaluations of specific expressions and conventions of how to be polite change in the course of time. As we have shown above and to take just one example, *would you* collocating with *please* has shown a significant decrease over the last sixty years in our data. Perhaps people generally issue fewer requests, but we think that this is unlikely. However, we do not know whether they have replaced this non-imposition formulation with a more direct formulation, an imperative perhaps. Or whether they have replaced it with an even less imposing one, a form that does not include the explicit request marker *please*.

It is clear how this change of politeness form can lead social commentators to deplore the decline of social decorum and ultimately the decrease of politeness wherever they see the old forms of being polite disappear. All the changes that we described above were gradual shifts over the course of two or three generations, and each older generation is very likely to still remember the values that pertained to the individual elements when they were younger, and deviations between the values are experienced as a loss or decline. But language keeps changing, and – as we have shown above – this includes changes in the ways in which we are being polite and impolite. To the extent that many people will continue to be apprehensive about language change, it is likely that many people will also continue to deplore a general decline of politeness levels.

Data availability

Corpus of Historical American English, https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/
Movie Corpus, https://www.english-corpora.org/movies/

Appendix

Results of Mann–Kendall test for monotonic non-linear timeline development. All results were calculated in R, with $p < 0.05$. Results that are not statistically significant are marked with "–". If no date range is provided, the results are based on the entire period of observation, 1930s–2010s.

Item	US/CAN development	UK/IE development
please	decline	decline
could you (please)	increase	increase
can you (please)	increase	increase
would you (please)	increase (1930s−2010s) decline (1960s−2010s)	decline (1960s−2010s)
Sir	decline	decline
Madam	decline	decline
Dr	decline	decline
Captain	decline	decline
Colonel	decline	−
Major	decline	−
Mister	decline	(not observed)
Mr	decline	decline
Miss	decline	decline
Ms	decline (1960s−2010s)	−
Mrs	decline	decline
Uncle	decline	−
Aunt	decline	decline
Lord	decline	decline
Lady	decline	decline
bullshit	increase	increase
cunt	(not analysed)	increase
damn	decline (1970s−2010s)	−
damned	(not analysed)	−
fuck	increase	increase
fucking	increase	increase
motherfucker	increase	(not analysed)
piss	(not analysed)	increase
shit	increase	increase

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