

# Studies on Politeness Levels of Request Expressions —Trends in English for the Past Century—

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## 依頼表現の丁寧度に関する研究 —英語 100 年の変化—

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これまで英語の依頼表現の丁寧度を扱った研究は数多く存在する。理論的には助動詞が最も重要であるが、文の長さもキーワードと言える。本稿では、Google Ngram Viewer 及び現代アメリカ英語コーパス(COCA)を使用し、様々な要素を含む依頼表現が、実際にどのような組み合わせで使われているのか、どの程度の割合で使われているのか、さらには個々の表現の使用状況に変化が見られるのかについて調査した。

その結果、助動詞が中心要素となっている表現が最も頻繁に使用されていると考えられることがわかった。また、多くの要素が組み合わされる場合、丁寧度に差のある要素同士であることはまれであり、同様の丁寧度のもの同士の場合でも結果的に丁寧すぎる表現は敬遠されることを確認した。歴史的変化を見ると、使われる表現の丁寧度は少しずつ上がっており、*could/can* を使う表現に近い将来最も一般的なものとなる可能性があると考えられる。

### 1. Introduction

Politeness levels of request expressions have been discussed by many researchers. Leech et al. (2003), Inoue (2011) and other researchers explain that longer sentences can be more polite, whereas subtle differences may drive researchers to compare the politeness level of various expressions. This paper aims to review several rules of making more polite and examine to see how these rules can be observed in a large scale corpora. Historical change is also considered to identify more effective rules hidden in politeness levels.

### 2. Literature Review

Brown & Levinson (1987) incorporate Leech and other many politeness researchers and sociologists' theories and summarize politeness strategies. They say in negative politeness strategy 1: "Be conventionally indirect" as follows:

For requests, only the forms represented by the following schema are polite (and hence are reasonably likely to be heard as requests between status equals):  
felicity condition +

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{question} \pm \text{subjunctive} \pm \text{possibility operator} \pm \\ \text{please} \\ \text{assertion} + \text{negation} \pm \text{subjunctive} \pm \text{possibility} \\ \text{operator} \pm \text{tag} \pm \text{please} \end{array} \right\}$$

[...]

In short, it looks as if the asserted forms need to be negated, and in addition to have at least a tag or a possibility expression (or a hedge on the illocutionary force, as in *I suppose*), and from the point of view of politeness, preferably both. (pp.135-136)

Brown & Levinson (1987) also mention *I need ~* and *I'm looking for ~* and explain as follows:

Any indirectness — that is, any communicative behavior, verbal or non-verbal, that conveys something more than or different from what is literally means — which in context could not be defended as ambiguous between literal and conveyed meaning(s), and therefore provides no line of escape to the speaker or the hearer, would serve the same purpose as the more idiomatic expressions. (p.134)

As shown above, Brown & Levinson (1987) introduce many forms and theories of making more polite sentences and imply that the more elements the sentence has from the above list, the more polite it is able to be.

Some more researchers summarize theoretical aspects of politeness levels. Coates (1993, p.130) mentions modal verbs and adverbs as “in English, for example, the modal auxiliaries *may*, *might* and *could* and the modal adverbs *perhaps*, *possibly*, *maybe* can be used as hedges by speakers, and thus function as negative politeness strategies.” On the other hand, Inoue (2011) introduces 12 elements which can increase the politeness level in Japanese. They are *kariru* [borrow] (by using this, putting the speaker at the subject, additional comment mine), *hoshii* / *tai* [want], *yoroshii* / *ii* [asking for confirmation], *desu* / *masu* [auxiliaries to add politeness], *o~* [prefix to add respect or humbleness], benefactive verbs, honorific forms of benefactive verbs, expression of possibility, negation, *keredomo* [but at the end of sentence], suffix or intonation to show a question (pp.336-338, Translation mine).

Noteworthy mentions are made on historical change in politeness levels. According to Ide (2006, pp.166-168), women tend to use more polite expressions than men because of women's relatively low positions in society and then polite expressions used by women gradually lose the impression of being polite, which has women use more polite expressions. These trends are not only seen in women. Inoue (2011) reports on *~te itadaku* [let me do something] although the target is not English but Japanese.

More people say ‘*Setsumei sasete itadakimasu* [Let me explain]’ instead of ‘*Watashi ga setsumei shimasu* [I will explain].’ By doing so, the speaker expresses they can receive some benefits from the addressee. In other words, the speaker pretends to praise the addressee. (p.310, Translation mine)

Regarding this point, Kawaguchi, Kamatani, & Sakamoto (2002) introduce *atakamo* [as if] expression and provide an example where an expression for asking for permission is chosen instead of an expression for making an offer because the former sounds more polite than the latter. According to their politeness principle, it is the most polite to show that the speaker knows the addressee's decision will help the speaker to act and then to obtain benefit, and it is the least polite to show that the speaker thinks their decision will help the addressee to act and then to obtain benefit. Therefore, even when the speaker's behavior can benefit the addressee, an expression for asking for permission sounds more polite although the situation is opposite (pp.24-25). This fact can make it more complicated to distinguish between requests and invitations. But, it is true that using “as if” expressions is one of the important strategies to make a more polite request.

From the above observation, it can be said that the average level of politeness has been increasing.

Halliday & Matthiessen (2014) “refer to the system of MODALITY as the speaker's judgement, or request of the judgement of the listener, on the status of what is being said” comparing to POLARITY (p.172) and explain “intermediate degrees, between the positive and negative poles, are known collectively as MODALITY” which can be realized by propositions and proposals (p.176). Propositions include “two kinds of intermediate possibilities: (i) degrees of probability: ‘possibly/probably/certainly’; (ii) degrees of usuality: ‘sometimes/usually/always’ (p.177).” Proposals include obligation in a command and inclination in an offer. “Obligation and inclination can be expressed ... (a) by a finite modal operator” or “(b) by an expansion of the

predicator through verbal group complexing (pp.177-178).” Therefore, for requesting the judgement of the listener, careful consideration and selection of modality is inevitable.

### 3. Method

As shown in Chapter 2, politeness levels of request expressions are mentioned in several fields. Some literatures quote lists of request expressions in the order of politeness level, and some propose theoretical descriptions. Based on Brown & Levinson (1987, pp.134-136), Tsuruta, Rossiter, & Coulton (1988, pp.90, 120-121), Coates (1993, p.130), Leech et al. (2003 p.499), Morizumi et al. (2003, p.60), Thayne & Sato (2007, pp. 48, 51, 70-72, 117), Onishi & McVay (2011 pp.105-106), and Nakatani (2013, November, p.54), the elements used in English request expressions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 English Request Elements

Feeler	Core	Main Verb
I would be happy if	it would be possible to	ask
Would you mind if	you would mind ~ing	others
I was wondering if	Would you mind ~ing?	
Would it be all right if	you could	
I wouldn't suppose	you would	
I don't suppose	May I ...?	
Do you suppose	Would it be possible to	
Do you think	You couldn't ..., could you?	
	Do you mind?	
	Could you...?	
	Can you...?	
	Would you ...?	
	I'd like you to	
	Will you...?	
	I need to	
	I want you to	
	You need to	
	You will	

Note: For asking for permission, *I* can be combined with *can / could* instead of *you* in Core.

Tools are Google Ngram Viewer<sup>1</sup> and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)<sup>2</sup>. Google Ngram was realized by Michael et al. (2010), and in the field of sociolinguistics, its utility was noticed and introduced by Inoue (2013, February 23). Google Ngram has the data of Google Books and can show historical changes of usage. The data are not from conversation data; however, it is believed that Google Ngram can help observe certain trends of usage. In this research, specified keys (case-insensitive) are searched in the corpus of English fiction from 1800 to 2008, and the results are shown as graphs with smoothing of three. However, due to limitations of space, basically, only the data from 1900 to 2008 are shown here. On the other hand, COCA has data extracted from 1990 to 2012. Among many sections, the data in movies (FIC-movies) are used here.

The procedure is as follows: First, typical phrases from Table 1 are used as keys in Google Ngram Viewer to analyze the preference and historical change in usage (percentage) based on the obtained graphs. Those which are highly likely to include many non-request expressions are excluded here, such as *suppose* group, *think* group, *You will*, *You need to*, and tag. Note that only feeler and core expressions are focused, and any additional expressions including adverbs, apology, and reasons are ignored. These expressions are handled as additional elements though they can give subtle nuance to sentences. This is because, for example, adverbs can be added almost freely and additional elements can make the story too complicated. Second, to provide further proof, the target phrases are examined in COCA. Third, the trends of preference are summarized.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 First attempt

First, all possible patterns are used as follows:

I was wondering if

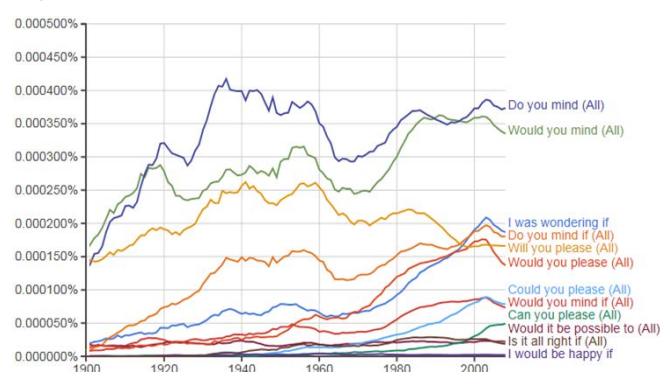
<sup>1</sup> This tool is available on  
<<https://books.google.com/ngrams>>.

<sup>2</sup> This corpus is available on <<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>>.

Would you mind if  
 Would you mind  
 Do you mind if  
 Do you mind  
 Would it be possible to  
 Could you please  
 Would you please  
 Can you please  
 Will you please  
 I would be happy if  
 Is it all right if

Note that *please* is inevitable for *Could you*, *Would you*, *Can you*, *Will you* to exclude non-request expressions such as *Can you play the violin?*, a simple question asking for the addressee's ability, and *Would you like a cup of tea?*, an offer, even though it is explained that adverbs are not subject to analysis in Chapter 3. It is confirmed *please* is the most often used with *could* / *can* although it is assumed that *please* can add too much imposition<sup>3</sup> and *could* / *can* might be combined with different adverbs such as *possibly* and *kindly*.

Figure 1 Overall<sup>4</sup>



As shown in Figure 1, *Do you mind* and *Would you*

<sup>3</sup> Refer to Tsuruta, Rossiter, & Coulton (1988, p.90) and Thayne & Sato (2005, p.42).

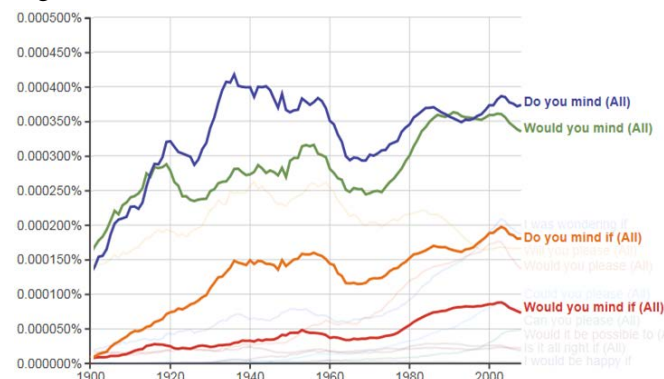
<sup>4</sup> Errors are shown as follows:  
 Search for "I would be happy if" yielded only one result.  
 Search for "I was wondering if" yielded only one result.

*mind* most frequently appear in the sources. The sources in "English fiction" include English learning materials and references on communication. Therefore, expressions including *mind* might fairly frequently be presented due to *mind*'s feature of usage. This means that educational books can increase the usage compared to actual usage. On the other hand, it appears that *Would it be possible to*, *I would be happy if*, and *Is it all right if* are rarely observed although these have relatively high politeness levels because of the length of the expressions. Except for the above five expressions, *I was wondering if* is found the most, but it should be pointed out that *Will you*, *Could you*, *Would you*, and *Can you* (without *please*) might be more common than *I was wondering if*. In actual fact, COCA has 21 cases of *could you please* and 417 of *could you*, 36 of *would you please* and 867 *would you* (not including *would you like*).

Next, each element, or group of elements, will be focused on. In order to provide clearer figures, a new figure will be provided by highlighting each target element or group of elements in Figure 1.

## 4.2 Mind

Figure 2 Mind



Related to *mind*, there are two typical subsequent patterns: *if* and *~ing*. To roughly check the differences, with and without *if* are introduced as the keys. It is assumed that if the percentage of "with" is subtracted from that of "without," the percentage of "with *~ing*" can be obtained. Based on this assumption, it seems that

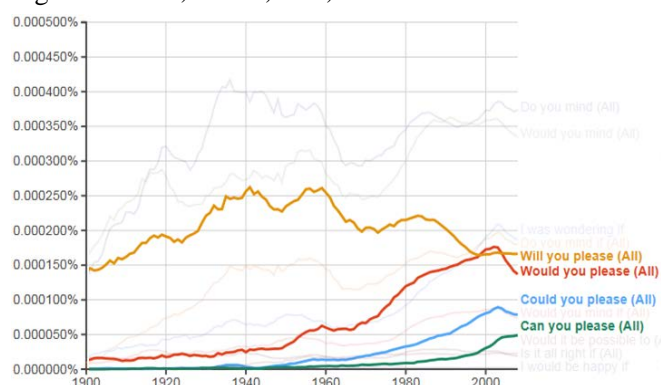
“with *~ing*” is more frequently used than “with *if*” (See Figure 2). This means that direct requests are more common.

According to COCA, there are 76 cases of *Do you mind* and 44 cases of *Would you mind*. Out of 76 or 44, the numbers of “with *if*” are respectively 35, 13, “with *~ing*” 11, 30, and others 30, 1. Unlike the results in Google Ngram Viewer, *Do you mind if* and *Would you mind ~ing* are more often heard than *Do you mind ~ing* and *Would you mind if*. Using *if* allows you to propose a conditional, which makes the sentence more polite. In other words, less polite *Do you mind* is more often combined with more indirect *if*, and more polite *Would you mind* with more direct *~ing*. It can be explained that out of the four combinations using *mind*, the middle two expressions are preferred because both too polite and too direct are avoided.

#### 4.3 *Would, Could, Will, Can*

As Kuraya (2012, p.37) summarizes, the result of examining 22 grammar references published in and out of Japan is that modality is a crucial element in describing English request expressions. In this section, *Could you please*, *Would you please*, *Can you please*, and *Will you please* are compared.

Figure 3 *Could, Would, Can, Will*



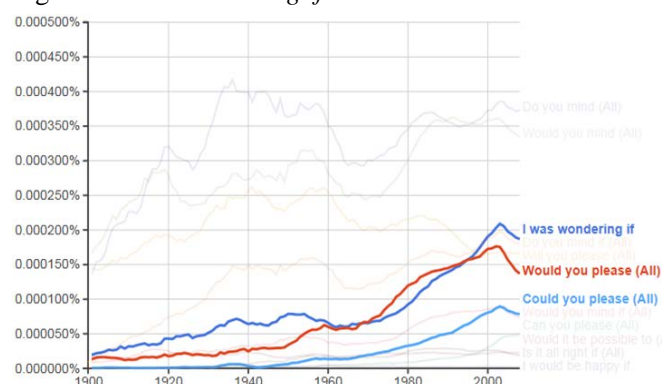
As shown in Figure 3, *Will you please* has prevailed for a long time, but its subjunctive form started to become more widely used around the 1950's. On the other hand, *Could you please* and *Can you please* are

relatively new expressions and gradually becoming popular. *Will you please* has a relatively strong imposition as Tsuruta, Rossiter, & Coulton (1988, p.105) explain, but it seems that a reduction in usage stopped around 2000. This expression might survive in workplaces. The usage of *Could you please* and *Can you please* continue to rise steadily, whereas the usage of *Would you please* may stop rising. It is predicated that *could / can* might become more common modals in making a request sometime in the future. The sources include some English learning materials which can have unrealistic usage patterns to present helpful information to learners, but it should be no problem as far as they are compared among the above four expressions since the difference among them is the type of modal and it is likely that they have similar usage in educational books.

According to COCA, *Could you please*, *Would you please*, *Can you please*, and *Will you please* are found respectively, 21, 36, 12, and 24 times. Their rankings are almost the same as those by Google Ngram Viewer. If the data are limited to the years of 2000 or later, the figures are 9, 11, 7, and 7. The ratios of the part to the whole in *could / can* is higher than those of *would / will*. This can also prove the change shown by Google Ngram Viewer.

#### 4.4 *Wonder*

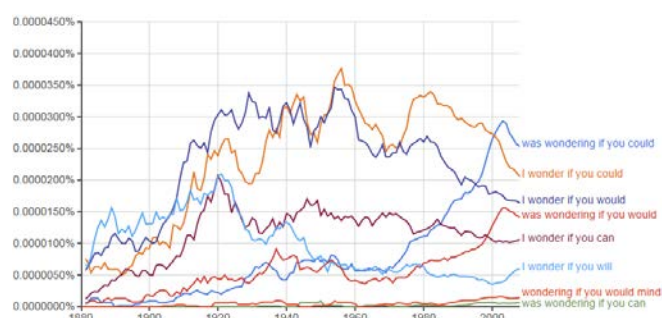
Figure 4 *I was wondering if*



The usage of *I was wondering if* has been changing in a similar way to that of *Would you please*. However, it

appears that sources show *I was wondering if* can be also used in a situation where the speaker is dreaming an unrealistic result. Therefore, one or more words are added to search keys to separate it into several more specific expressions. Note that *was wondering* is used instead of *I was wondering* because of the limitations of the system.

Figure 5 Wonder<sup>5</sup>



Figures 6 and 7 are created by highlighting one of the target groups in Figure 5. As shown in Figures 6 and 7, the *I wonder* group has gradually been decreasing since 1950's, whereas the *was wondering* group started to increase around 1910's and has been dramatically increasing since 1980's. In terms of accompanied modals, the figures are higher in the order of *could*, *would*, *can*, and *will*, but *will* cannot be seen with the *was wondering* group. These rankings agree to those of politeness levels summarized by Kuraya (2012, p.32).

Figure 6 *I wonder* group<sup>6</sup>

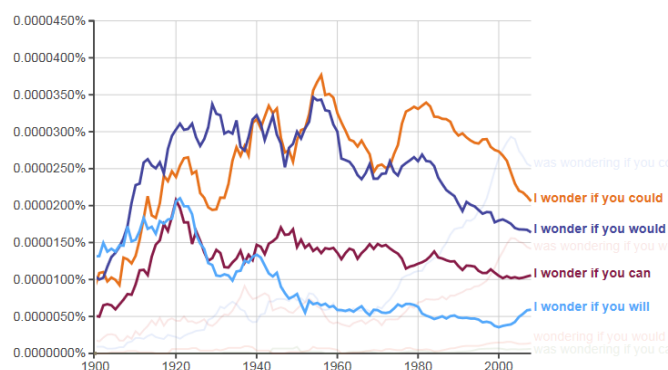
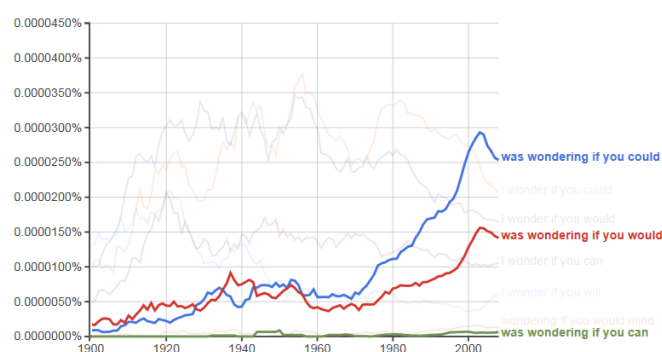


Figure 7 *Was wondering* group<sup>7</sup>



It could be said that the higher politeness levels are preferred in making requests and also that it is not preferable lower levels of elements are combined with relatively higher levels of elements such as *will* and *I was wondering*. Nevertheless, *was wondering if you would mind* is hardly seen probably because it is

<sup>5</sup> Errors are shown as follows:  
Search for "I wonder if you would" yielded only one result.  
Search for "was wondering if you would" yielded only one result.  
Search for "I wonder if you can" yielded only one result.  
Search for "wondering if you would mind" yielded only one result.  
Search for "was wondering if you could" yielded only one result.  
Search for "I wonder if you will" yielded only one result.  
Search for "was wondering if you can" yielded only one result.  
Search for "I wonder if you could" yielded only one result.  
Ngrams not found: was wondering if you will

<sup>6</sup> Errors are shown as follows:  
Search for "I wonder if you would" yielded only one result.  
Search for "I wonder if you can" yielded only one result.  
Search for "I wonder if you will" yielded only one result.  
Search for "I wonder if you could" yielded only one result.  
<sup>7</sup> Errors are shown as follows:  
Search for "was wondering if you would" yielded only one result.  
Search for "wondering if you would mind" yielded only one result.  
Search for "was wondering if you could" yielded only one result.  
Search for "was wondering if you can" yielded only one result.  
Ngrams not found: was wondering if you will



extremely polite and there is almost no opportunity to appropriately use.

COCA shows 29 cases of *I was wondering if you* and 18 of *I wonder if you*. In terms of the modals following *you*, the usage is as shown in Table 2. This shows *I was wondering you could* can be the most common if you make a request using *wonder*, and *might* is also sometimes used though *may* and *might* are not included in Figure 1.

Table 2 Usage by Modal Following the Target

Target	Modal	Usage
I was wondering if you	could	10
	might	6
	would	4
	wanted	2
	had	1
I wonder if you	could	5
	would	2
	will	2
	can	1
	might	1

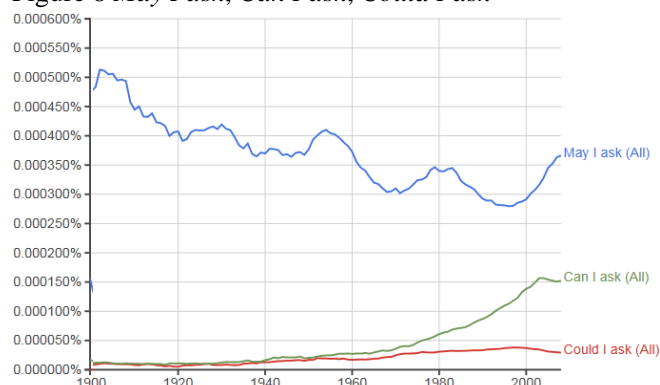
#### 4.5 Modality for asking for permission

With consideration of the results in Section 4.3, asking for permission is examined here especially for including *may*. For search keys, *May I ask*, *Could I ask*, *Can I ask* are used. *May I*, *Could I*, and *Can I* can work as keys but *ask* is added to have them more specific requests. Moreover, it is confirmed that the ranks of usage are the same even if *ask* is replaced by *speak*, which is often used in telephone conversations.

Figure 8 indicates that *May I ask* has been the most common expression, while *Can I ask* and *Could I ask* started to increase around 1970's. *Can I ask* once reached about the half of *May I ask* around 2000. It can be safe to say that *may* remains the most common modal to use for asking for permission, and *can* and *could* started to follow *may* in the same way as request expressions whose subject is the addressee. However, some sources of *May I ask* are Chinese learning

materials and can have unrealistic usage in the same way as English learning materials. Unlike the case of Section 4.3, it appears that Chinese learning materials can be seen only in the sources for *May I ask* although not all the sources are examined. This may increase the usage of *May I ask* drastically unlike the other two. If this point is taken into account, it is likely that the usage of *may* might not be so high compared to the other two.

Figure 8 *May I ask*, *Can I ask*, *Could I ask*



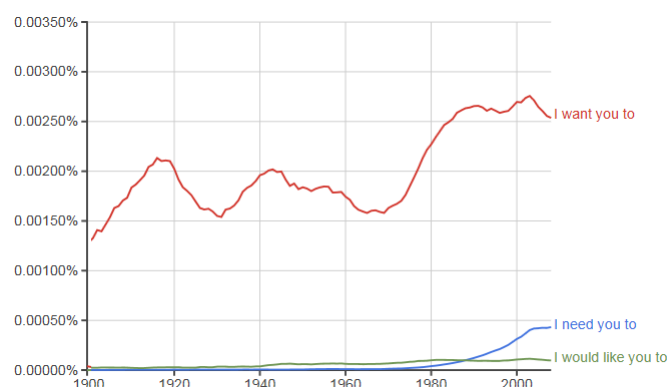
COCA has 35 cases of *May I ask*, 64 of *Can I ask*, and 5 of *Could I ask*, and the rankings do not agree with Google Ngram Viewer. In the cases of *speak*, the figures are 16, 13, and 5, and the difference between the modals is small. This might show that *ask* is one of the hedges and its combination with *may* or *could* can give the impression of being too formal in many cases.

#### 4.6 *Need, want, would like to*

As Brown & Levinson (1987, p.134) mention, the speaker often expresses the hope to have the addressee do what they want. Finally, *I need you to*, *I want you to*, and *I would like you to* are put in the search box of Google Ngram Viewer. In theory, with consideration of distancing, *I would like you to* is preferred to *I want to*, and then *I need you to* can feel like a command. However, Figure 9 clearly shows *I want you to* is the most common and *I would like you to* is the least. *I want you to* is a direct expression, so if the speaker wants to make it more polite, they might choose a normal request expression such as a question rather than *I would like*

*you to* because *I would like you to* is still direct enough.

Figure 9 *Need, want, would like you to*<sup>8</sup>



According to COCA, *I want you to* is found 574 times, *I need you to* 126, and *I would like you to* 6. The rankings are the same as Google Ngram Viewer, but the percentage of *I need you to* is suppressed to a very low level. However, this does not show *I want you to* is very common in making a request because this expression can be seen for caring for others such as in *I want you to have a good night's sleep* from *Encrypt* (2003) and *I want you to be happy* from *25th Hour* (2002). Further examination will be needed, especially for *I want you to*.

## 5. Conclusion

As observed above, it is confirmed that many elements are involved in deciding the level of politeness and the level of politeness has gradually been increasing. Adding elements can easily increase the politeness level, but an unbalanced combination such as a really polite element and too direct one is not appropriate. Even with a balanced combination, too polite expressions tend to be avoided.

From the overall data, it can be said that modals are key in many ways. It is highly likely that the usage can be the highest in *Would you*, *Could you*, *Will you*, and

*Can you* though these “without *please*” expressions are not thoroughly examined here. There is one more point to point out here regarding modals. This has been observed in comparisons of asking for permission and making a normal request. When the subject is *I*, an appropriate level of politeness can be lower than when *you* is used. This would be because more care is shown in asking for the addressee's decision than in making a decision themselves. The trends for modals are changing, but *could* / *can* can become more preferred modals in the near future.

## Data

Google Ngram Viewer Available from  
<https://books.google.com/ngrams>  
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 Available from <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>

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<sup>8</sup> Errors shown as follows:  
 Search for “I need you to” yielded only one result.  
 Search for “I would like you to” yielded only one result.  
 Search for “I want you to” yielded only one result.



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