

Article

Deficiencies in Japanese University Students' Knowledge of
Polite English Request Patterns

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Researchers have pointed out distinctions in the way politeness is conceptualized by Japanese and English speakers. Michael Haugh (2004), for example, says that politeness in English means “showing consideration for others, and demonstrating a polished self-presentation” (p. 85). In Japanese, on the other hand, it means “showing respect . . . and consideration towards the position and quality of character of others, and modesty about oneself” (p. 85). While there are clear overlaps in these perceptions of politeness, the “differences in the underlying conceptualisation of politeness give rise to different ways of expressing politeness” (p. 85). And it is indeed possible to argue that Japanese, with its use of honorifics, and specific verb forms and vocabulary to indicate the relative status not only of the speaker and listener but also of others mentioned, is considerably more formulaic in its approach to politeness than English. Fascinating while such distinctions may be, however, it is difficult to insist that they should be of great concern to those involved in the teaching or learning of either language: being able to use the target language in a way that native speakers of that language would normally perceive to be polite is fundamental to learning a foreign language. For the learner of Japanese, then, it is essential to learn the honorifics, verb forms and vocabulary items that are required if the learner is to be socially functional in that language. Similarly, it is essential for the learner of English to be able to use the polite forms of the language as appropriate. A cursory examination of the English speech and writing patterns used by students educated in Japan indicates that schools here fail to equip their students with this very basic linguistic skill.

A simple test of the ability of approximately sixty second-year students attending one of Japan's top private universities (not Nippon Medical School) to translate a polite Japanese request into English demonstrated that many of them have failed to acquire the ability to select an even vaguely appropriate request pattern in English after more than seven years of

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instruction in the language, and that none of them could make a request that would be perceived by native speakers of English as “very polite.” The subject students were instructed to translate the following sentence, using the politest English possible: *Taihen kyoushuku desu ga, saifu wo ie ni wasureteshimaimashita node, ichiman-en gurai kashite itadakemasenka.* (大変恐縮ですが、財布を家に忘れてしまいましたので、1万円ぐらい貸していただけますか。 [*I’m terribly sorry (to trouble/bother you), but I’ve left my wallet at home. I wonder if you could possibly lend me 10,000 yen.*]) Since the focus of this paper is polite request forms in English, only the last part of the sentence (*ichiman-en gurai kashite itadakemasenka*) will be considered as the target sentence. The students’ translations of this request can be classified into four basic patterns:

1. Please lend me 10,000 yen.
2. Will/Would/Can/Could you lend me 10,000 yen(, please)?
3. I would like you to lend me 10,000 yen.
4. Would you mind lending me 10,000 yen?

The patterns the students used are listed in the order in which they will be dealt with below, and not in order of appropriateness or frequency of use. While pattern no. 4 is certainly the best of the four, none of them adequately fits the context or constitutes an accurate translation of the Japanese; no. 2 is the pattern the students most commonly selected. More appropriate patterns are given both in the pages that follow and in the appendix.

Please lend me 10,000 yen. (Imperative + *please*)

With such explanations as *Meirei-bun no bunbi ya buntou ni “please” wo kuwaeru to, yaya teineina hyogen ni naru* (命令文の文尾や文頭にpleaseを加えると、ややていねいな表現になる。 [*Adding “please” to the beginning or end of imperative sentences makes them fairly polite.*]) (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 23) the norm in English grammar books and textbooks published in Japan, it is not surprising that many students mistakenly believe that direct orders can be magically turned into polite requests by the simple expedient of adding please to them. (Actually, the writer of the quoted reference book deserves some credit for qualifying *teinei* [“polite”] with *yaya* [“fairly”/“rather”]; many books of the type include no such qualification.) On the other hand, “orders” may not necessarily be what they seem, and it is also quite wrong to automatically equate the imperative mood in English with the imperative mood in Japanese: whereas the latter is invariably impolite and is in fact used only in a limited number of situations, the former has multiple applications, many of which are perfectly polite. (For the purposes of this paper, “Japanese imperative” should be taken to refer to the *miro*, *kake*,

suware [見ろ, 書け, 座れ], etc. forms.)

There is a distinct tendency among Japanese users of English to mistranslate English imperatives with Japanese imperatives. Examples abound in the Japanese subtitles of English-language movies; they can also be found in supposedly professional Japanese translations of literary works (Petersen, 2004, pp. 63-65). While the English imperative can, like the Japanese imperative, be used to give orders, whether an English imperative construction constitutes an order or not depends not only on the actual words used, but also on the context in which it is used, the intentions of the speaker, and the other person's interpretation of it. Context is, of course, fundamental to good translation: what is commonly said in a certain context in one language should be translated with an expression that would be commonly used in the same context in the other language, regardless of the grammatical form or specific vocabulary employed to say it. In the context of a teacher admonishing a disruptive student to *Sit down*, for example, *suware* might be a reasonable Japanese translation, although *suvarinasai* would probably be much more appropriate. On the other hand, *suware* would be an absurd mistranslation of *Sit down* (or, more likely, *Take a seat*), in the context of someone welcoming a guest to their home. *Okake kudasai* would be appropriate, although the English version is certainly less formal. The difference between these two examples is obvious: in the first, the context, and the speaker's intentions, as conveyed by his tone of voice, make it quite clear that an order is being issued, and the student will almost certainly interpret the speaker's words as such. In the second example, by contrast, the speaker is issuing an invitation, and again, the context will make it clear to the addressee that this is the case.

An order delivered with an English imperative construction is not in and of itself impolite; in fact, it is not impolite at all if the speaker has a right to issue it and the person(s) being addressed accepts that the speaker has that right. Concrete examples abound in the form of public notices in English-speaking countries, *Keep off the grass* being a common one. This is, of course, an order, but since the lawns protected by such signs are usually privately owned, the owners have the generally acknowledged right to tell visitors to stay off them. Such signs are equivalent to *Shibafu no naka tachi-iri kinshi* (芝生の中立ち入り禁止) in Japanese; they are certainly not equivalent to *Shibafu no naka ni hairuna* (芝生の中に入るな).

English imperatives are also regularly, and perfectly politely, used to tell people what to do when the action is perceived to be to their advantage; whether it is also to the speaker's advantage is irrelevant. It might well be argued that inviting someone to do something and telling them to do something that is to their own advantage amount to the same thing. Certainly, it would be possible to interpret *Sit down*, as said to a guest visiting the speaker's home, not only as an invitation but also as a suggestion that it will be to the guest's advantage to do so. Similarly, imperatives are regularly used in advertising to suggest that there are great benefits

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to be gained by purchasing the advertising company's products: *Fly to paradise. Relax in your own deluxe villa. Breathe the fragrant tropical air. Book with Traveltours International.* Warnings are also issued for the benefit of the addressees, and in English they are often delivered with imperatives: *Mind the gap.* (This is Transport for London's somewhat laconic warning that travelers pay attention to the gap between the train and the platform so that they do not fall into it.) / *Stand clear of the closing doors.* / *Do not lean out of the window.* / *Watch out for pickpockets.*

And regular everyday personal interactions also involve the innocuous use of imperatives. For example, someone asked by a colleague to check a document might well respond with *Sure, send it to me by email.* Again, the action of sending the document is perceived to be to the advantage of the person sending it. Similarly, someone asking how to get to the post office or how to scan a document will not be even remotely offended if the instructions given in reply are delivered with imperatives: *Turn right at the next corner.* / *Switch the printer on and select the scan mode.* Imperatives can also be used with complete impunity to encourage people or to express good wishes: *Do your best!* / *Have a great time in Italy.* They can even be used to give advice: *Go (and) see the doctor.* / *Take a day off and enjoy yourself for a change.* Care should, however, be exercised in using imperatives to give advice: there are safer (i.e. more polite) ways of giving advice, and while both of the above examples, said in the right way, sound friendly, they would be inappropriate if directed at someone other than a close friend.

The same "to the other person's advantage" rationale applies to written instructions delivered with imperatives: *Fill out the application form and send it to the following address.* / *Do not open the test book until you are instructed to do so.* These may appear to be orders, and there is certainly no harm in considering them as such. However, not only does the person issuing them have a right to do so, but following the instructions is clearly to the advantage of the person addressed: a person filling in an application form is almost certainly doing so for his own benefit and not for the benefit of the person it is being submitted to; taking tests and passing them, which cannot be done if the candidate breaks the rules laid down by those administering the tests, is also to the advantage of those taking them.

To summarize, the use of English imperatives is perfectly polite for the following purposes:

1. To tell people what to do (i.e. to give orders and instructions) when you have a recognized right to do so: *Open your books at page 36.* / *Have your bags ready for inspection by security staff.* / *Remove your shoes and place them in the bag provided.* / *Leave by the rear exit.*
2. To issue warnings: *Watch out!* / *Don't go near the dog.* / *Be on the alert for unattended bags.*

3. To make offers, invite people to do something, or tell them what they can do if they want to (i.e. what options are available to them): *Drop by whenever you're in the neighborhood. / Come in and make yourself at home. / Help yourself to some soup. / Use my car – it's right outside. / Push the green button for gentle background music or the red button to watch TV. / Change here to the Yamanote Line.*
4. To explain how to do something: *Cross the railroad and take the first turning to the left. / Plug the USB cable in and follow the instructions on the screen.*
5. To tell or recommend people to do something that is to their own advantage (or that you want to suggest is to their own advantage): *Phone now to order while stocks last. / Give me your phone number, and I'll call you as soon as I have any information. / Take this to the service counter, and they'll stamp it for you.*
6. To encourage people or express good wishes: *Don't worry: everything will be fine. / Enjoy yourself at the party.*
7. To give advice to someone you know well (not appropriate with other people): *Just tell him you're not interested in him anymore. / Try the new Chinese restaurant in the mall – I'm sure you'll love it.*

In some cases, adding *please* to the above examples makes them more polite, but in others it actually has the effect of making them less polite. The key to understanding whether *please* makes a particular sentence more polite or not lies in judging whether it is appropriate to indicate to the addressee that you really want them to carry out the action indicated by the imperative. In some cases, indicating such a wish by adding *please* is appropriate, and therefore polite, while in others it is not appropriate.

Orders, instructions, and warnings issued by someone who has a recognized right to give them are invariably issued in the hope that the addressee will carry them out or pay attention to them. Therefore, imperatives indicating orders, instructions, and warnings are commonly preceded by *please*, especially in spoken English, but also in written notices: *Please switch the lights off when you leave the room.* Urgency precludes the use of *please*, of course: wasting time saying *Please watch out* when someone is about to walk backwards off the edge of a cliff makes no practical sense.

Using *please* with imperatives employed for purposes other than to issue orders/instructions/warnings can be problematic, in no small part because *please* is so commonly associated with orders/instructions/warnings that its use in other contexts can easily make the resulting sentences appear to be orders, even when they are not intended as such.

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Invitations, for example, are slightly problematic. By adding *please* before *Drop by whenever you're in the neighborhood*, the speaker strengthens the sincerity of the invitation: he really wants the other person to visit; therefore, the addition of *please* makes the invitation more polite. *Please take a seat* also has a strengthening effect: the speaker really wants his guest to sit down. But the guest's perception that his host really wants him to sit down puts more pressure on him to accept the invitation and could even make him feel that he is being ordered to sit down, as might be the case, for example, in a job interview. This might well make him feel uncomfortable, especially if he himself would prefer not to sit down. Similar problems arise with *Please use my car* (should the speaker make the addressee feel that he will be disappointed if the addressee rejects the offer?), and *Please change here to the Yamanote Line* (it cannot be of any consequence to the person announcing the options available to passengers whether they actually avail themselves of those options or not, so indicating that she actually wants them to change to the Yamanote Line is more than a little peculiar).

The author has devised a simple test students can use to assess the appropriateness of adding *please* to an imperative construction: substitute *I want you to* for *please*. If the resulting sentence matches the intended meaning, *please* will probably be appropriate. *I want you to open your books at page 36*, for example, matches the message the speaker wishes to convey, so *Please open your books at page 36* is appropriate. On the other hand, *I want you to change here for the Yamanote Line* is unlikely to be the message someone making a general announcement to everyone on a particular train wishes to convey, so *Please change here for the Yamanote Line* is similarly peculiar. Thinking about the impact that such invitations/offers as *I want you to take a seat* and *I want you to use my car* might have on the addressee helps students to understand the problems associated with using *please* before them.

In explaining how to do something, preceding the imperative with *please* is, of course, absurd: *Please turn right at the next corner* would give the addressee the impression that the speaker actually wanted him to turn right at the next corner and conjure up images of ulterior motives. The same might well apply to encouragements/best wishes preceded by *please*: naturally, parents want their children to "Do your best," and people generally want their friends to "Have a good time in Italy." However, in communicating such encouragements/best wishes, the focus of the speaker's comments should be on the other person(s) and not on his own desires. A parent saying, *Please do your best* to a child before an important exam, for example, could be taken to be hinting at dire consequences if the child fails.

Similarly, in telling or recommending someone to do something that is to their own advantage, the speaker runs a distinct risk of negating the point by adding *please* and thereby bringing his own desires into the picture. We are all well aware, for example, that Traveltours International really wants us to book a holiday through them, but if they used *Please book with*

Traveltours International in an advertisement, the focus would switch immediately from the possible advantages to us of booking through them to the desires of the company. In other words, although *We want you to book with Traveltours International* may well express the real intentions of the company, the sentence fails to fit a situation in which they are trying to persuade us to favor them with our business. On the other hand, if there is no obvious advantage to the speaker, as for example in a TV station's exhortation that viewers stay tuned, preceding *Stay with us for the news* with *please* would certainly not be inappropriate.

There is an enormous difference between orders issued by people who are recognized to have a right to issue them and orders issued by people who are not recognized to have that right. Recognition of the right to issue orders in specific situations can vary from culture to culture, and even among cultures that share the same the language. In the US, for example, it is not unusual for restaurant customers to issue orders like *Give me a hamburger and fries* to waiters without raising the ire of the latter. (In a family setting, however, the same sentence would almost certainly be viewed as inappropriate.) Any waiter raised in the UK, by contrast, would find such an order deeply offensive, unless perhaps it came from an American (British waiters watch Hollywood movies). This should not be taken to mean that Americans are generally more likely to use imperatives, but simply that there is a discernable difference between the US and the UK in linguistic expectations associated with the customer-waiter relationship.

On the other hand, there is no difference between the US and the UK, or presumably any other culture in the world, when it comes to ordering someone to lend you money: nowhere would anyone be recognized to have the right to issue such an order. Therefore, *Lend me 10,000 yen* is a highly inappropriate phrase to use in almost any conceivable situation. Adding *please* has no significant ameliorative effect: regardless of the mistranslations and erroneous explanations of the *please + imperative* pattern given in Japanese high school English textbooks and grammar books, one extra word will not turn a fundamentally inappropriate and rude order into a polite request. Trying to make *Lend me 10,000 yen* polite by adding *please* is on almost the same level as trying to make *Go to hell* polite by adding *please*! The only situation in which an order like *Lend me 10,000 yen* could be appropriate is when the action is made to appear to be to the other person's advantage: *Lend me 10,000 yen, and I'll give you 100,000 yen tomorrow*.

Will/Would/Can/Could you lend me 10,000 yen, please?

Question tags (*will you?, would you?, can you?, could you?*) can be, and often are, added to imperative sentences, but whether it is appropriate to use them depends on the function of the imperative. Question tags are conversational devices used, mainly, to keep a

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conversation flowing by inviting a verbal response from the other person. Therefore, they are not used in writing, or if the purpose of the imperative is, for example, to explain how to do something: someone explaining how to retrieve data from a malfunctioning hard disk will hardly wish to engage in chatty conversation. In fact, unless the purpose of the imperative is to issue an order, instruction, or warning, such tags are very unlikely to be appropriate. In the case of oral orders, the use of question tags has the effect of making the orders chattier, and consequently less forceful and (slightly) more polite, although this does not apply when the order is fundamentally rude or inappropriate (e.g. *Shut up, will you?*), or delivered in an angry or impatient way.

When imperative constructions are followed by question tags, the most common patterns are positive imperative + positive tag / negative imperative + positive tag: *Take this to the office for me, will you?* / *Help me with this, will you?* / *Don't tell anyone I told you, will you?* Such instructions are commonly issued by people who know each other well, or by people addressing juniors. However, they are fundamentally far from polite, and their use would be inappropriate when addressing superiors or relative strangers. The same can be said of *Will you take this to the office for me?* The only structural difference between this and *Take this to the office for me, will you?* is the position of *will you*, so the difference in politeness level is unlikely to be large. The question tag version is less formal (i.e. friendlier) (Eastwood, 1994, p. 22), but the two sentences are fundamentally the same. English grammar books and textbooks published in Japan customarily translate *Will you . . . ?* with *-shite kuremasenka* (Kotera, 2005, pp. 112-113), which in terms of politeness level is an evident mistranslation. The addition of *please* only makes sentences starting with *Will you . . . ?* marginally more polite: they are still fundamentally orders or instructions. Again, the question of whether the speaker has a recognized right to issue the order/instruction is still very important in deciding whether either *Will you . . . ?* or *. . . , will you?* is appropriate. While it is quite appropriate for a teacher to say to a class, *Open your books at page 36, will you?*, it is totally unacceptable from the point of view of common etiquette for a student to say to a teacher, *Will you write a reference for me?* Adding *please* makes no difference if the order itself is inappropriate. It should perhaps be added that an order/instruction with *will you?* issued by someone with no recognized right to issue it is less impolite than the same order issued with *please + imperative*. However, Japanese learners of English should not be encouraged to use either pattern, as they regrettably are by the mistranslations given in most of the reference books they use. The confusion over the politeness level of *Will you . . . ?* on the part of reference book writers may be partially accounted for by their failure not only to recognize the significance of whether the speaker has a recognized right to issue the order/instruction or not, but also by the fact that when the pattern is used to issue offers or invitations, it is certainly polite: *Will you have another cup of*

tea? / *Will you stay for dinner?* It should be noted, however, that there are other more common ways of issuing such offers/invitations, the most usual of which is *Would you like (to) . . . ?* Furthermore, the use of *Will you . . . ?* to issue offers/invitations would strike many native speakers of English as slightly old-fashioned. The same applies to *Won't you . . . ?*, which sounds more insistent and therefore less polite. (Minton, 1999, p. 17)

Using *would you?*, *can you?*, or *could you?* instead of *will you?* as tags in sentences of this kind raises the politeness level considerably: the speaker is actually making a request rather than issuing an order. Being conditionals, *would you?* and *could you?* express a higher degree of hesitation on the part of the speaker and are therefore more polite than *can you?*, but the difference is not large from the practical point of view. Nevertheless, even though the *Would/Can/Could you . . . , please?* pattern is a perfectly reasonable way to make light requests, it is certainly on a much lower politeness level than the *-shite itadakemasenka* form used in *Ichiman-en gurai kashite itadakemasenka*. And the pattern is not at all persuasive in requesting a significant favor. Therefore, the students who selected this pattern also failed to translate the target sentence accurately, although they did rather better than those who used *Please + imperative* or *Will you . . . ?* Again, Japanese learners of English are misled as to the politeness level of the *Would/Can/Could you . . . ?* pattern by erroneous reference book translations (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 103, p. 113).

Only two students used a negative construction to translate the target sentence: *Won't/Can't you lend me 10,000 yen?* While grammatically correct, these are highly unsuitable translations of the original Japanese, especially the version with *can't*. Negative tags can certainly be used after orders made with positive imperatives, but the resulting sentences are impolite and emotionally charged. In *Help me with this, can't you?*, for example, the speaker is probably annoyed that the other person has not offered to help of his own accord, and use of the pattern could easily make the speaker sound upset and/or carping. The same is also true of *Can't you help me with this?* There is, however, one negative pattern that is relatively frequently used to make requests: *You couldn't lend me 10,000 yen, could you?* None of the subject students used this pattern, probably because they have never been introduced to it, but at an informal level it is a polite way to request a favor: first the polite assumption is made that it would be impossible for the other person to accede to the request (*You couldn't . . .*), and this is followed by the hopeful *could you?* But naturally, this is far less formal than the target Japanese sentence. A more formal and more polite version of the pattern is *I don't suppose you could lend me 10,000 yen, could you?*, which would actually not too far off the mark as a suitable translation of the target sentence.

I would like you to lend me 10,000 yen.

Presumably, the students who selected this pattern were viewing it as a translation of *-shite itadakitai* (～していただきたい), which indicates that they may not have much idea of how to make polite requests even in their own language: telling someone what you want them to do, which is the function of both the English and Japanese patterns, is very different from asking them to do you a favor. True, *would like* is a polite version of *want*, just as *itadakitai* is a polite form of *hoshii*, but this does not change the fundamental meaning. Far from being a polite request, *I want/would like you to . . .* is used to issue instructions of the kind a dentist might give to a patient: *I'd like you to bite down on this as hard as you can*. As a question, however, *Would you like to . . .?* (or *Do you want to . . .?*) can be used as a request pattern on the same sort of politeness level as *Can you . . .?* It would not be inappropriate, for example, for someone to call home from the station and ask a family member, *Would you like to pick me up?* However, *Would you like to lend me 10,000 yen?*, while much better than *I would like you to lend me 10,000 yen* (which is totally inappropriate), is certainly a mistranslation of the target sentence: the politeness levels are completely different.

Would you mind lending me 10,000 yen?

Would you mind . . .? is one of the most common ways of making requests at a reasonably polite level in English, and it was the best of the patterns the subject students selected. However, it certainly cannot be classified as “the politest English possible.” Reference books published in Japan point out the distinction between *Would you mind . . .?* and *Do you mind . . .?* in terms of politeness (Egawa, 1991, p. 459), but they do not necessarily mention that in practice, the latter pattern is far less commonly used to make requests. The reason *Do you mind . . .?* is less common as a request form is not simply because *would* is fundamentally more polite, but also because there is a slight danger of confusion inherent in using *do* to make a request. *Would you mind sitting here?*, for example, is clearly a request, whereas *Do you mind sitting here?* could be a question designed to gauge the satisfaction or comfort level of someone who is already sitting. A similar danger can occur when *Do you mind* is used for the purpose of asking permission, if it is followed by gerunds; *Do you mind my smoking?*, for example, could be taken as a question designed to gauge the addressee’s general opinion of the speaker’s smoking habit, while *Do you mind if I smoke?* can only be taken as a request for permission. This is probably the main reason why gerunds are relatively uncommon in *Do/Would you mind* patterns when the purpose is to request permission. Both *Would you mind . . .?* and *Do you mind . . .?* followed by *if* clauses are commonly used to ask permission.

Conclusion

If translation of the target sentence had been part of a properly administered international test of English proficiency, all of the subject students would have scored poorly on that particular question: the instructions called on them to use “the politest English possible,” which they all failed to do. Those who used *Would you mind lending me 10,000 yen?* would probably have been awarded a few token points, and it is even possible that *Would/Can/Could you lend me 10,000 yen, please?* might have attracted one or two consolation points. However, *Will you lend me 10,000 yen?* would (or certainly should) have scored zero, as would *Please lend me 10,000 yen* and *I would like you to lend me 10,000 yen*. That a group of sixty or so second-year students attending a well-regarded Japanese university should be unable to perform such a basic task in English as to use a polite request form is a serious indictment of the training they have received in the language; it also raises questions about the effectiveness of the Japanese government’s 20-year-old policy of emphasizing aural/oral communication skills in English education.

It is actually not at all difficult to make polite requests in English. It often involves wordiness, but by far the quickest and simplest way to dramatically increase the politeness level is simply to insert *possibly* into the *Could you . . . ?* pattern: *Could you possibly let me know when you’re going to arrive(, please)? / Could you possibly come and see me sometime next week?* This one word makes an incomparably larger difference than *please*. *Possibly* also works in requests made with *Can you . . . ?*, but it cannot be used in combination with *Will/Would you . . . ?* (As previously pointed out, *Will you . . . ?* is not a request form anyway.) It is also difficult to fit *possibly* convincingly into a *Would you mind . . . ?* request pattern.

Two common English request patterns that none of the subject students used are *I would be (very) grateful if you could . . .* and *I would (greatly) appreciate it if you could . . .*. These patterns are both polite as they are, but the addition of *possibly* makes them even more polite: *I would be very grateful if you could possibly lend me 10,000 yen. / I would greatly appreciate it if you could possibly lend me 10,000 yen.* In both patterns, *would* can be used instead of *could* in the *if* clause, but *possibly* cannot be added if the modal selected is *would*.

Another way to raise the level of politeness in requests for favors is to preface them with variations on *I wonder if*: *I wonder if you could possibly check this for me. / I’m wondering if I could possibly take next Monday off. / I wondered if I could possibly borrow your car for the weekend. / I was wondering if you would mind if my daughter came to the party as well.* The past tense versions sound more hesitant and are, therefore, slightly more polite, but as all of the patterns are extremely polite anyway, the difference is not of great significance from the practical point of view. The present tense versions can be followed by *can* (*I wonder if you can possibly check this for me*), but the past tense versions require *could*; naturally,

could is fundamentally more polite than *can*.

A chart listing various patterns used in English to make requests is presented in the appendix. The patterns are listed in ascending order of politeness, but it should be noted that the first five entries are not actually request patterns at all: they are included simply because native speakers of Japanese use the second, third, and fourth to make requests in English with distressing frequency. Appropriateness in English politeness levels depends on the context, the intentions of the speaker, the expectations of the other person(s), and the relationship between the speaker and the person(s) being addressed, just as it does in Japanese. Perceptions on such matters vary to some extent, naturally enough, and it is possible that other native speakers of English would make minor changes to the order in which the author has presented the expressions included in the list in the appendix.

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Appendix: request patterns in ascending order of politeness (the first five entries are not actually request patterns)

Lend me 10,000 yen.	Direct order of the kind that nobody has a recognized right to make. Therefore, extremely impolite, and never appropriate in asking a favor. It is important to note, however, that orders made with English imperatives by people recognized to have a right to make them are not necessarily impolite, although they clearly differ from requests; imperatives are also perfectly polite in various other situations, as described above.
Please lend me 10,000 yen.	Only marginally less impolite than the above – never appropriate in asking a favor.
I want / I would like you to lend me 10,000 yen.	Used to give instructions, not to make requests – never appropriate in asking a favor.
Will you lend me 10,000 yen, please?	Not so much a request as a demand – never appropriate in asking a favor.
Lend me 10,000 yen, will you?	More of a demand than a request; possible with family members or close friends, but totally inappropriate with anyone else.
Lend me 10,000 yen, can you? / could you? / would you?	Better than the above, but still only possibly with family members or close friends.
Would you like to lend me 10,000 yen?	Possible with family members or close friends, but inappropriate with anyone else.
Can you / Could you / Would you lend me 10,000 yen (, please)?	Basic request pattern – OK if you know the other person well and are confident that he/she will probably accede to your request.
You couldn't (possibly) lend me 10,000 yen, could you?	Chattier than the previous pattern, but probably more persuasive with someone you know well; not appropriate with people you do not know well. Adding <i>possibly</i> makes it more polite.
Would you mind lending me 10,000 yen?	Reasonably polite, but not particularly suitable if you are asking a <u>significant</u> favor. Certainly polite enough for friends or family members.
Could you possibly lend me 10,000 yen (, please)?	Polite request, although some people might not find it polite enough for a significant favor.

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<p>I don't suppose you could possibly lend me 10,000 yen, could you?</p>	<p>This is a more polite version of <i>You couldn't . . . , could you?</i> Probably polite enough for most purposes, and appropriate as a translation of the target sentence considered in this paper.</p>
<p>I'd be very grateful if you could / would lend me 10,000 yen. / I'd greatly appreciate it if you could / would lend me 10,000 yen.</p>	<p>Polite request – suitable with anyone; appropriate as a translation of the target sentence.</p>
<p>I'd be very grateful if you could possibly lend me 10,000 yen. / I'd greatly appreciate it if you could possibly lend me 10,000 yen</p>	<p>Extremely polite: the addition of <i>possibly</i> makes these requests quite a lot more polite than the previous patterns. Close friends or family members might find the pattern patronizing, but it is appropriate as a translation of the target sentence.</p>
<p>I wonder / I'm wondering if you could possibly lend me / if you would mind lending me 10,000 yen.</p>	<p>Extremely polite request – probably too polite for a close friend or family member but appropriate as a translation of the target sentence.</p>
<p>I wondered / I was wondering if you could possibly lend me / if you would mind lending me 10,000 yen.</p>	<p>Not significantly different from the previous pattern.</p>