



SOCIO-PRAGMATIC VARIATION IN CAMEROON FRENCH REQUESTS

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Abstract:

This study investigated aspects of the requesting behaviour of Cameroonian French speakers. Based on examples produced by 81 French-speaking Cameroonian students, the analysis was devoted to request strategies across three situations, focusing on request strategy types, their linguistic realizations, pragmatic modifiers, as well as variation in the use of request patterns according to degree of familiarity, type of power relationship and type of imposition. The results reveal social variation regarding the frequency and use of direct or indirect request strategies and pragmatic modifiers (internal and external). It was also found that requests were predominantly introduced with attention-getters and/or greetings and that nominal address terms were used to soften or aggravate requests across the three situations.

Keywords: requests, politeness, situational variation, Cameroon French

1. Introduction

The body of research on pragmatic features of Cameroon French is growing, with scholars examining phenomena such as address terms, speech acts (cf. Mulo Farenkia, 2008; 2017), and discourse markers (cf. Simeu, 2016). These studies implicitly operate from the premise that Cameroon, like other postcolonial societies, is characterized by cultural and linguistic hybridity, while seeking to demonstrate how such a postcolonial setting impacts pragmatic and linguistic aspects of Cameroonian French discourse. The present study contributes to this line of research, focusing on strategies used by Cameroonian French speakers in making requests in situations involving peers, strangers, and superiors. It offers an examination of the types of request strategies used and highlights the influence of *peer equality*, *social distance*, and *power asymmetry* on the choice of request strategies. The article is organized as follows. It begins with the theoretical background in section 2, followed by a description of the method of data collection and data analysis in section 3. Then, the results are presented and discussed in section 4.

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2. Theoretical background

2.1 Defining requests

Requests are directive acts, i.e. “attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something” (Searle, 1976:11). Trosborg (1995: 187) defines a request as “an illocutionary act whereby a speaker (requester) conveys to the hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the requestee to perform an act which is for the benefit of the speaker.” Since a request has to do with an act to be performed in the speaker’s interest, it impinges on the interlocutor’s own freedom of action and freedom from imposition (negative face): it is a face-threatening act (cf. Brown and Levinson, 1987). Previous studies have shown that, while speakers make use of a wide range of linguistic and pragmatic strategies when requesting, the choice of specific strategies is determined by the power difference and the social distance between the interlocutors, the weight of imposition of the request and the sociocultural environment within which the request act is realised. Consequently, request strategies differ across different languages, language varieties and socio-cultural contexts.

Moreover, while some speakers may use a wide range of request and politeness strategies in order to save the interlocutor’s face, avoid interpersonal conflict, and get the hearer to perform the requested act, other requesters may, for various reasons (peer equality, power asymmetry, etc.) choose request strategies that aggravate the weight of imposition of the request and the negative impact thereof on the interlocutor’s face. As far as request realization strategies are concerned, previous research indicates that request utterances are generally analysed as consisting of a single discursive move or as being made up of several discursive moves. In Blum-Kulka et al’s (1989) coding scheme, requests are divided into two functional components, namely the head act and pragmatic modifiers. The head act is the core unit since it can be used to make the request independently from any other unit of the utterance. Pragmatic modifiers can be added within the head act itself (internal modifiers) or outside the head act, through other types of speech moves occurring either before or after it (external modifiers). These modifiers serve either to soften or to strengthen the illocutionary force of the requests.

2.2 Literature review

2.2.1 Requests in western-based varieties of French

In contrast to the extensive research on requests in English and other languages (cf. Rue & Zhang, 2008, Flöck, 2016; Kranich et. al, 2021; Napoli, 2021), research on requests in French has mostly focused on the varieties spoken in France (cf. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2001a/b, 2005a, 2005b, 2009), Canada (cf. Berrier, 2008, Blum-Kulka et. al, 1989), and Belgium (cf. Roggeman, 2015), as well as on L2 French in European and North-American contexts (cf. Holttinen, 2013; Warga, 2004, 2005, 2007, Bae, 2012; Rys, 2007; Forsberg & Erman, 2012). Some studies compare requests in French and in Dutch (cf. Van Mulken, M., 1996; Roggeman, 2015), English (cf. Béal, 2010), Finnish (cf. Holttinen, 2016), Italian (cf. Held, 1995), Romanian (cf. Barbu 2008), German (cf. Lochtmann, 2022).

Kerbrat-Orecchioni’s research on requests in French French has focused on realisation patterns, modifications, and responses to requests (2005a, 2005b, 2009). She finds French speakers to prefer indirect requests and mitigated direct requests using the politeness marker *s’il vous plait* ‘please’ and/or minimizers like *petit* ‘small’, *juste* ‘just’ and she considers these

choices as illustrations of the French ethos of negative politeness. Berrier's (2008) study on requests in service encounters in Canadian French reveals the abundant use of external modifications (e.g. preparatory acts) and the use of request strategies such as *naming the product*, *declarative constructions with the verbs chercher 'to look for'* (e.g., *je cherche le livre X* 'I am looking for the book X'), *want statements with vouloir 'to want'* (e.g. *je veux /je voudrais* 'I want/I would like to'), and *questions*. In her study on requests in Belgian French, Roggeman (2015) found in her data that there was no instance of direct request, that most of the speakers used conventional indirect requests (mostly query preparatory strategies) and other request strategies consisting in describing the goal of the transaction or the situation or using constructions with the verbs *chercher* and *vouloir*. She also found that most of the requests in her data were mitigated by means of internal elements such as the conditional, the politeness marker *s'il vous plait*, and external modifiers (e.g. justifications).

2.2.2 Requests in African varieties of French

Research on pragmatic features of African French varieties is very limited (cf. Johns & Félix-Brasdefer, 2015 for a study on requests in French spoken in Senegal and France). A few studies on requests in Cameroonian contexts include Apuge & Faissam (2021) on requests in English by French-speaking Cameroonians, Kouega (2018) on requests in Cameroon Pidgin English, Mulo Farenkia (2016) on written requests by French-speaking University students, and Tabe, & Faissam's (2018) article on requests in French by native speakers of Fulfulde. While these studies have shed some light on types of request strategies and internal modifiers, they did not address the question of social variation, i.e. the impact of social distance and power relationship on the choice of request strategies. The present study thus aims to explore request strategies and socio-pragmatic variation in order to understand how these factors influence Cameroon French speaker's requesting behaviour. More specifically, it addresses the following question:

- What strategies do Cameroon French speakers use to make requests to their friends, their superiors, and to strangers?

2.3 Postcolonial pragmatics

Request strategies are examined from a postcolonial pragmatics perspective since the data were produced in a speech community, which is characterized, like other postcolonial societies, by cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. Based on the general assumption that this hybridity has an impact on the pragmatic features of the European languages (i.e. English and French) used in this speech community, the analysis carried out seeks to show how this is specifically at work in the realization of requests. This approach is in line with the premise of postcolonial pragmatics that "*just as colonisation led to new hybrid varieties of the colonial languages of power, it also led to new, culturally and linguistically mixed, patterns of communication – and to new pragmatic strategies – in these varieties*" (Janney, 2006: 3). A postcolonial perspective is appropriate to highlight pragmatic and linguistic choices that are influenced by social aspects of situations, the transfer of indigenous cultures and languages of postcolonial speech communities to speech act realization in ex-colonial languages (cf. Anchimbe and Janney, 2011).

3. Method

3.1 Participants and data collection

Eighty-one respondents participated in the study. They were all French-speaking students at the University of Yaoundé (64 females and 17 males), aged between 18 and 30 at the time of data collection (2014). The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire consisting of different situations. In order to account for the impact of social distance and power relationship and the weight of imposition of the request on the choice of request utterances, the respondents were presented with twelve situations and were asked to construct possible dialogues between the participants in these situations. In the present study, we will focus on the three following situations:

- a) *Friend - Kitchen* (Situation 1): The speaker asks his/her flatmate to clean up the kitchen the latter left in a mess after cooking.
- b) *Stranger - Electricity Bill* (Situation 2): The speaker asks the employee of the electricity company who is about to disconnect power at his/her house, because of unpaid electricity bill, not to do so.
- c) *Professor - Deadline Extension* (Situation 3): The speaker (a student) is late with an assignment and asks his/her professor for an extension.

The social variables that were built into the questionnaires were the type of horizontal relationship (i.e. social distance) between the speaker and the hearer and the type of vertical relationship (power asymmetry) between them. While the relationship between the interactants in situation 1 (Kitchen) is a close one (peer equality: - D, S=H); in situation 2 (Electricity bill) they don't know each other and they have unequal status, based on the institutionalised role of the employee of the electricity company (+ D and S<H): the power asymmetry derives from the fact that the employee, representing their employer (the company), has the authority to disconnect energy supply, because the customer, by not paying their bill, has failed to respect their own part of the contract. As will be shown in the analysis below, many examples show that requesters in this situation generally realise their requests in the form of supplications. In situation 3 (Deadline extension), the recipient of the request has a higher power position (professor) and the student and professor know each other as acquaintances (- D and S<P).

Table 1 summarizes the variables built in in the scenarios.

Table 1: Summary of the DCT request scenarios

Situation	Social Distance/Power	Topic	Setting	Interlocutors
Sit 1	- D and S=H	Kitchen	Home	Friend to Friend
Sit 2	+ D and S<H	Electricity bill	Home	Customer to Employee
Sit 3	- D and S < P	Extension	Campus	Student to Professor

3.2 Data analysis

Overall, 240 examples (each consisting of a request and a request-response) were collected from the 81 respondents, namely 71 answers in Sit. 1, 80 answers in Sit. 2 and 81 answers in Sit. 3. The framework used to analyse the first pair parts, the request utterances, in our data was adapted from previous taxonomies of request strategies (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; Faerch and Kasper

1989; House and Kasper 1981). Overall, these studies break down requests into two functional components: the *head act* and *internal/external pragmatic modifiers*. The head is “the clause containing the verb expressing the directive illocutionary point and is obligatory for a request to exist” (Napoli, 2021: 19). In other words, it is the sequence of the request utterance that actually expresses the request. A request act must have a head act but does not need pragmatic modifiers, as can be shown in (1). The head is the underlined clause *S’il vous plaît, ne me coupez pas la lumière*, while the utterance in bold is an external modifier which is used to support the request to the interlocutor not to disconnect the speaker’s power. The promise to pay the bill the following day is intended to convince the interlocutor not to disconnect the power supply. However, the external modifier is not obligatory for the request to exist. Also, the head act contains the politeness marker *s’il vous plaît* which serves as an internal mitigating modifier, since it softens the illocutionary force of the request, but it is not obligatory. The speaker could have just said *Ne me coupez pas la lumière* and still conveyed their illocutionary intent.

- 1) *S’il vous plaît, ne me coupez pas la lumière. Je vous promets d’aller régler ma facture demain en matinée.* (Stranger)ⁱⁱ
‘Please don’t disconnect my power. I promise to go and pay my bill tomorrow in the morning.’

Studies on requests generally identify three main strategies through which requests can be realised: *direct strategies*, *conventionally indirect strategies*, and *non-conventionally indirect strategies*.ⁱⁱⁱ Each of these three main strategies can be divided into several sub-strategies. Direct request strategies include imperatives as in (2), explicit performatives as in (3), hedged performatives as in (4), want statements as in (5), and obligation statements as in (6).

- 2) *Ne me coupez pas le courant s’il vous plaît.* (Stranger).
‘Don’t disconnect my power please.’
- 3) *Je vous demande de me laisser encore quelques jours.* (Stranger)
‘I am asking you to give me a few more days.’
- 4) *Je vous prie de m’accorder une journée de plus.* (Professor)
‘I plead with you to give me an extra day.’
- 5) *Je voudrais que vous me donniez un jour de plus.* (Professor)
‘I would like you to give me an extra day.’

ⁱⁱ The examples from the data are coded as follows. (Friend) stands for requests / request responses from the Kitchen situation (S1), (Stranger) stands for examples from the Electricity bill situation (S2), while (Professor) stands for examples from the Deadline extension situation (S3).

ⁱⁱⁱ Trosborg (1995) proposed a different coding scheme, consisting of eight different requesting strategies. they are grouped as follows: (a) direct requests (*imperatives, elliptical phrases*), (b) conventionally indirect requests (hearer-oriented strategies (*ability, willingness, permission, suggestory formulae*) and speaker-oriented strategies (*wishes, desires, obligation, performatives*)), and (c) indirect requests (*mild and strong hints*).

- 6) *Il faut mettre de l'ordre à la cuisine.* (Friend)
'You have to tidy up the kitchen.'

Conventional indirect request strategies include *query preparatory strategies*. These are questions relating to preparatory conditions (e.g. ability as in (7), possibility as in (8), willingness of the act being performed as in (9), permission to perform an action as in (10)), and suggestions as in (11).

- 7) *Peux-tu ranger la cuisine s'il te plaît ?* (Friend)
'Can you put order in the kitchen?'
- 8) *Est-ce possible que vous m'autorisez de le rendre plus tard ?* (Professor)
'Can you allow me to submit it (my assignment) later?'
- 9) *Est-ce que tu veux bien ranger l'espace cuisine ?* (Friend)
'Do you mind cleaning up the kitchen space?'
- 10) *Puis-je le rendre demain s'il vous plaît ?* (Professor)
'Can I submit my assignment tomorrow please?'
- 11) *Si vous voulez, on peut d'abord arranger à l'amiable.* (Stranger)
'If you want, we can first find an amicable solution.'

Non-conventional indirect request strategies are generally realized through hints. Blum-Kulka et al. make a difference between "strong hints" and "mild hints" based on the pragmatic force with which hints are pragmatically associated with the action to be performed. An example of a hint is given in (12).

- 12) *Cela fait depuis deux jours que je vois la cuisine en désordre.* (Friend)
'It's been two days now that I see/notice the kitchen is in disorder.'

Our data also reveal the use of other indirect request strategies that are not accounted for in previous classifications. These include complaints as in (13) and ordinary questions as in (14).

- 13) *Pourquoi y a-t-il tant de désordre ici ?* (Sit 1)
'Why is there so much mess here?'
- 14) *Comment faire?* (Professor)
'What do I do?'

In the present study, all indirect requests will be grouped under one general category, *indirect request strategies*.

In addition to the analysis of types of request strategies, we also examined pragmatic modifiers, i.e. elements that are added to the head acts. These additional elements occur either within the head act itself or outside the head act. They appear, in the literature under the categories “internal modification” and “external modification”, respectively (cf. Trosborg’s 1995). These modifiers serve either to soften (softeners/mitigators) or to strengthen the illocutionary force of the request (intensifiers/upgraders). Consequently, there are two types of internal modifiers, namely internal mitigators and internal upgraders, and two types of external modifiers, namely external mitigators and external intensifiers. Internal mitigators include *politeness markers* (e.g. *Ne me suspendez pas le courant s’il vous plaît*. ‘Don’t disconnect my power please.’), *conditional*, e.g. *Il faudrait penser à ranger la cuisine*. ‘You should think about tidying up the kitchen.’) *minimizers* (e.g. *S’il te plaît peux-tu faire un peu de ménage ?* ‘Please can you do some cleaning?’), etc. Internal intensifiers include *time intensifiers* (e.g. *Peux-tu l’arranger rapidement ?* ‘Can you quickly tidy it (the kitchen) up?’), *lexical intensifiers* (e.g. *Elle ressemble à un dépotoir*. ‘It looks like a dump.’), etc. External mitigators include *preparators* (e.g. *Je voudrais vous demander une faveur* (Professor) ‘I would like to ask you for a favour.’), *grounders* (e.g. *Monsieur mon garçon est très souffrant*. (Professor) ‘Sir my son is very ill.’), *offers* (e.g. *Tiens voilà, t’as une 33 (bière)*. (Stranger) ‘Here is a beer for you.’), *claiming common interest or in-group membership* (e.g. *Laisse-moi encore un peu de temps, c’est entre nous non ?* (Stranger) ‘Give me a little more time, it’s between us, isn’t it?’). External intensifiers include *Complaints/reprimands* (e.g. *Le désordre que tu as laissé ne me plaît pas*. (Friend). ‘I don’t like the mess you left (in the kitchen)), *moralizing questions/acts* (e.g. *Je vais faire comment dans le noir ?* (Stranger). ‘How would I cope in the dark?’).

4. Request realisation strategies

Table 1 summarizes the overall distribution of the three main strategies employed in request utterances. After segmenting the examples into individual acts, each of them was classified/counted as a direct request (strategy), an indirect request (strategy), or as an external modification strategy. Table 1 indicates that the respondents produced 898 strategies, which are mostly used in the stranger (352 tokens) and professor (332 instances) situations. Of the 899 strategies attested, 218 (31.3%) are request head acts and 617 (68.7%) are external modifiers. Within the category of head acts, the results show that direct requests are slightly more frequent than indirect requests. Direct requests are most preferred in the stranger situation (68 examples), while indirect requests mostly occur in the friend situation (77 instances). We also see that external modifiers are more frequent in the stranger (266 instances) and professor (247 tokens) situations.

Table 1: Overall distribution of request strategies

Request strategies	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
Direct requests	34	68	43	145 (16.1%)
Indirect requests	77	17	42	136 (15.2%)
External modifiers	104	266	247	617 (68.7%)
Total	215	351	332	898 (100%)

Let us now turn to the analysis of the head act strategies. We will start with direct request strategies.

4.1 Direct request strategies

There are many direct request strategies in the data. These are ‘imperatives’, ‘performatives’, ‘hedged performatives’, and ‘want statements’, and ‘obligation statements.’

Their frequencies in the three situations are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Overall use of direct request strategies

Direct request strategy	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
Imperatives	19	58	17	94 (64.8%)
Hedged performatives	4	7	16	27 (18.6%)
Performatives	0	2	1	3 (2.1%)
Want statement	4	1	9	14 (9.7%)
Obligation statement	7	0	0	7 (4.8%)
Total	34	68	43	145 (100%)

Table 2 shows that, of all the direct requests attested (145), 68 (46.9%) occur in the stranger situation, followed by the professor situation (45 instances, 29.7%) and the friend situation (34 tokens, 23.4%). We also see that 64.5%, i.e. 94 instances, of all direct requests are realised using the “imperative” strategy. This realisation type is mostly used in the stranger situation (58 tokens). The second most common realisation type is the “hedged performative” strategy. It represents 27 instances, accounting for 18.6% of all direct requests, and occurs most frequently in the professor situation (16 examples). The third type, the “want statement” strategy, accounts for 14 occurrences, i.e. 9.6% of all direct requests, and it appears predominantly in the professor situation (9 tokens). The results also indicate that the “obligation statement” strategy, which accounts for 7 instances, is attested only in the friend situation. The least used type is the “performative” strategy, which is employed only three times.

As far as the realisation forms of the direct request strategies are concerned, the results show that these strategies take different linguistic forms and that they are seldom used alone when making requests.

The imperative strategy is mostly realised using constructions with verbs in the imperative. The speaker can either ask their interlocutor to carry out a specific action or ask/order them not to execute a specific action. As already mentioned, the imperative structures are generally accompanied by different types of pragmatic modifiers. These include attention getters, address terms, politeness markers (e.g. *Mon frère, s’il te plaît donne-moi encore deux jours.* (Stranger) ‘My brother, please give me two more days.’). Other realisation forms of the imperative strategy include constructions with expressions such as *veuillez + infinitive* (e.g. *S’il vous plaît monsieur, veuillez m’accorder une dispense d’une semaine.* (Stranger) ‘Please sir, grant me a one week exemption.’), *permettez-moi de + infinitive* (e.g. *Monsieur l’agent permettez-moi de payer plus tard s’il vous plaît* ‘Mister agent, allow me to pay later, please.’) and constructions without verbs (e.g. *Mon frère, un peu de compassion s’il te plaît* (Stranger) ‘My brother, a little compassion, please.’). Other request strategies and/or external modifications are employed as

pragmatic modifiers of imperatives (e.g. *Émilie, fais l'effort de ranger la cuisine. Le désordre que tu as laissé ne me plaît pas.* 'Emilie, make the effort to tidy the kitchen. I don't like the mess you left.')

The hedged performative strategy takes different forms, in which the segment representing the solicited action is preceded by formulas like "je voudrais vous de demander + NP /de + VP" (e.g. *Je voudrais vous demander un moratoire de deux semaines.* 'I would like to ask you for a two-week moratorium. '), *je vous prie de* (e.g. *Je vous prie de ne pas couper l'électricité cette semaine.* 'Please don't cut the electricity this week. '), *je vous supplie de bien vouloir* (e.g. *Je vous supplie de bien vouloir repousser la date de la coupure d'électricité.* 'I beg you to please postpone the date of power cut. '), *je souhaiterais vous demander la permission de* (e.g. *Je souhaiterais vous demander la permission de vous remettre mon devoir que je n'ai pas pu terminer plus tard.* 'I would like to ask your permission to submit my homework later that I was unable to complete. ').

The 'want statement' strategy is realised using constructions with the verbs *vouloir* 'to want', *aimer* 'to like', *souhaiter* 'to wish' in the indicative present or past tenses and in the conditional, the latter being the most chosen type. Some of the patterns used in these constructions include *j'aimerais (bien)* (e.g. *Mon ami, s'il te plaît j'aimerais que tu mettes un peu d'ordre dans la cuisine.* 'My friend, please I would like you to put some order in the kitchen. '), *je voudrais* (e.g. *Je voudrais que tu la ranges.* 'I would like to tidy it. '), *je souhaite que* (e.g. *S'il vous plaît Monsieur l'agent, je souhaite que vous ne me coupiez pas le courant.* 'Please, mister agent, I hope you don't disconnect my power. '), *je souhaiterais que* (e.g. *Je souhaiterais que vous me permettiez de vous le remettre demain.* 'I would like you to allow me to submit it tomorrow.')

The 'obligation statement' strategy is realised using constructions with the expressions *il faut (que)* and *il faudrait (que)* (e.g. *Pardon mon ami, s'il te plaît, il faut penser à venir ranger la cuisine.* 'Please my friend, you have to remember to come and clean the kitchen.' *Paul, il faut que tu nous ranges la cuisine aujourd'hui.* 'Paul you need to clean up the kitchen today.'). The performative strategy is realised as *Je ne demande plus qu'une seule semaine.* (Stranger) 'I only ask for a week. '; *Je vous demande de me laisser encore quelques jours.* (Stranger) 'I ask you to give some extra days. '; *Je vous exhorte de me permettre de le rendre après-demain.* (Professor) 'I urge you to allow me to submit it the day after tomorrow.')

4.2 Indirect request strategies

The respondents produced 136 indirect requests, using different types of speech acts which are distributed differently in the three situations, as can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Overall use of indirect request strategies

Indirect request strategy	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
Query preparatory	41	8	33	82 (60.3%)
1. Asking for ability	39	8	10	57 (42%)
2. Asking for possibility	0	0	9	9 (6.6%)
3. Asking for willingness	2	0	1	3 (2.2%)
4. Asking for availability	0	0	0	0
5. Asking for permission	0	0	13	13 (9.5%)
Suggestions / offers / reminder	6	9	0	15 (11%)
Hints	7	0	6	13 (9.5%)

Complaints	23	0	0	23 (17%)
Questions	0	0	3	3 (2.2%)
Total	77	17	42	136 (100%)

As we can see from the results, the respondents used the following indirect request strategies: speech to make requests: query preparatory, suggestions, offers, reminders, complaints, questions, and hints. The *query preparatory strategies* are the most popular indirect request strategies. They account for 82 examples of all indirect requests and they are most frequent in the friend (41 instances) and professor (33 instances) situations and they occur only 8 times in the stranger situation. It is also noteworthy that, of the five types of query preparatory strategies attested in the data, *ability questions* are, with 57 instances (69.5%), the dominant type. Ability questions appear most frequently in the friend situation (39 tokens of 57). It was also found that *permission questions* are exclusively used in the professor situation. This choice may be due to the power difference between the interlocutors. Using this strategy is a way to reduce the imposition of the request by indicating that it is only if the superior approves of it that the favour is considered as granted.

As far as realisations of the query preparatory strategies are concerned, it was found that the verbs in ability questions are used in the present indicative or in the conditional. These questions are realised using the following syntactic patterns: “*tu peux / vous pouvez + VP*”, “*peux-tu / pouvez-vous + VP*”, “*pourrais-tu / pourriez-vous + VP*”, “*est-ce que tu peux/pourrais + VP*”, “*est-ce que vous pouvez /pourriez + VP*”. Ability questions are modified with address terms and politeness markers (e.g. *Pourrais-tu mettre de l'ordre dans la cuisine s'il te plait ?* ‘Could you put some order in the kitchen, please?’), greetings (e.g. *Bonjour, s'il te plait, peux-tu ranger la cuisine?* ‘Good morning, please, can you arrange the kitchen?’), external mitigators such as grounders as in (15) or external upgraders such as complaints / reprimands as in (16).

15) *S'il vous plait monsieur, pouvez-vous accepter que je remette mon devoir lundi? Je n'ai pas pu le terminer à temps.* (Professor)

‘Please sir, can you accept that I submit my assignment on Monday? I couldn’t finish it in time.’

16) *S'il te plait, pourrais-tu remettre de l'ordre dans la cuisine? Elle n'est pas du tout présentable.* (Friend)

‘Could you please restore order in the kitchen? It is not presentable at all.’

The second most frequent indirect request strategy is complaints or reprimands and they are used only in the friend situation. An example is given in (17). The requester combines two reprimands to request for a particular action, namely tidying up the kitchen.

17) *Pourquoi y a-t-il tant de désordre ici? Depuis quand est-ce que l'on finit de préparer et on laisse la cuisine dans cet état?* (Friend)

‘Why is there so much mess here? Since when do we finish cooking and leave the kitchen in this state?’

Suggestions, offers, and reminders are the third most common indirect request strategies. In the friend situation, suggestions and reminders are associated with other strategies, for instance, greetings as in (*Bonjour. Cela te dirait souvent de ranger la cuisine après avoir fini de faire la cuisine ?* ‘Good morning. Would you often like to clean up the kitchen after you have finished cooking?’) In the stranger situation, offers and suggestions are associated with other strategies as in (18).

18) *Bonjour monsieur l'agent. Pardon on peut s'arranger, je vais me rendre demain à l'agence. J'ai eu quelques soucis monsieur. Hein, monsieur, vous pourriez d'abord prendre une bière.*
(Stranger)

‘Good morning mister agent. Please we can sort things out. I am going to go to the branch tomorrow. I had some issues sir. Hein, sir, you could first have a beer.’

4.3 Pragmatic modifiers

The analysis also reveals that the respondents soften or reinforce their requests using external and/or internal modifiers. The next section presents the types of external modifiers attested in the data.

4.3.1 External modifiers

As already mentioned, external modifiers appear before or after the head acts. Their function is to upgrade or mitigate the illocutionary force of the requests. Three main categories of external modifiers were identified in the data, namely *attention getters*, *external mitigators*, and *external upgraders*.

Table 7 presents the distribution of the types of these discursive moves in the corpus.

Table 7: Overall distribution of external modification

Category of external modifier	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
Attention getters	63 (60.6%)	133 (50%)	123 (49.8%)	319 (51.7%)
Mitigators	34 (32.7%)	127 (47.8%)	124 (50.2%)	285 (46.3%)
Upgraders	7 (6.7%)	6 (2.2%)	0	13 (2.2%)
Total	104 (100%)	266 (100%)	247 (100%)	617 (100%)

The results indicate that 617 external modifiers were identified and that they are mostly used in S2 (266 tokens) and S3 (247 instances). The lowest number of external modifiers is found in the friend situation (104 examples). The results also show that attention getters are the most frequent external modifiers in the data. These elements mostly occur in the stranger (133 examples) and the professor (123 instances) situations. External mitigators are, with 46.3%, the second preferred modifiers. They are mostly used in the stranger (127 instances) and the professor (124 tokens) situations. Upgraders are the least employed and they occur only in friend and stranger situations. We also examined the sub-types of the three main categories of external modifiers.

Table 8 summarizes the results of the analysis.

Table 8: Types and situational distribution of external modifiers

External modifier	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
Attention getters	63	133	123	319 (51.7%)
Address terms	35	76	81	192 (31.1%)
Politeness markers	24	52	42	118 (19.1%)
Others (interjections)	4	5	0	9 (1.5%)
Mitigating modifiers	34	127	124	285 (46.3%)
Grounder	17	38	75	130 (21.1%)
Greetings	13	17	21	51 (8.3%)
Promise and offers	0	35	7	42 (6.8%)
Apologies, Disarmers, and Imposition minimizers	1	28	10	39 (6.3%)
Thanks	2	3	3	8 (1.3%)
Appreciation	1	0	0	1 (0.2%)
Supplication and Appeal for solidarity	0	6	0	6 (1%)
Preparators and Getting a pre-commitment	0	0	8	8 (1.3%)
Upgrading modifiers	7	6	0	13 (2.2%)
Complaints, Moralizing, and Disagreement	7	6	0	13 (2.2%)
Total	104	266	247	617 (100%)

4.3.1.1 Attention getters

These devices are used to catch the attention of the interlocutor. In our study, we have classified elements such as address terms, politeness markers, and interjections as devices employed at the beginning of the request utterance to catch the hearer's attention. It is important to note that, while these request openers can have additional pragmatic functions, the focus in this section is on their "attention getting function". For instance, the address term *monsieur* is a term of respect or deference that serves to draw the attention of the interlocutor and which functions as a politeness strategy. Another example is the politeness marker *s'il vous plait* 'please' whose function at the beginning of a request is to catch the attention of the addressee, but it also serves as a request mitigator. Of the three types of attention getters found in the data, address terms are, with 192 occurrences, the most frequent. They appear mostly when students request for deadline extension to submit their assignments (Sit.3, 81 tokens) and when customers ask the employees of the electricity company not to disconnect power services (Sit. 2, 76 examples). Politeness markers are also used as attention getters predominantly used in Sit 2 (52 tokens).

4.3.1.2 External mitigators

Accounting for 285 instances, thus representing 46.3% of all external modifiers, external mitigators involve different types of speech acts, as can be seen in Table 8. These include grounders, greetings, promises, offers, apologies, thanks, etc. Occurring 130 times, grounders are the most preferred supportive move to soften requests, followed by greetings (51 examples), promises / offers (42 instances), apologies/ disarmers/imposition minimizers (39 times). The frequencies of the other additional moves are much lower. Table 8 also indicates that the situational distribution of these external mitigators is generally different. For example, we see that grounders appear 75 times in S3 (professor), 39 times in S2 (stranger) and only 17 times in S1 (friend).

Grounders, for instance, are used to offer reasons for the requests. The act of giving a reason that supports the necessity of the request varies across the three situations in terms of content and linguistic realisations. When speakers ask their friends and flatmates to clean up the kitchen in situation 1, they mostly use grounders that dwell on the necessity or obligation to respect social norms of cleanliness, the need to tidy up the kitchen after cooking so that the other flatmate can also use it. Grounders produced in the stranger situation are meant to appeal to the employee of the electricity company not to disconnect the power. Most examples show that the requester generally seeks to exonerate himself or herself by attempting to put the blame on lack of finances (e.g. *Je suis dans une situation financière critique et instable*. 'I am in a critical and unstable financial situation. '), social or health issues (e.g. *Pour des raison de maladie, j'ai utilisé l'argent du courant*. 'Because of sickness, I used the money for the electricity bill. '; *Mon épouse est hospitalise*. 'My wife is hospitalized. ' *C'est la période de rentrée (scolaire). C'est dur*. 'It is back to school time. Times are hard. ', *Mes enfants doivent lire pour composer*. 'My children have to read for their exams. ') etc. With such justifications, the requesters attempt to appeal for sympathy or empathy. In other words, they are trying to say that they did not pay their electricity bill not because of unwillingness but because of circumstances beyond their control (e.g. social and financial stress). In the Cameroonian collectivistic society, this strategy is employed with the intent of persuading the interlocutor to grant the request: in this situation, disconnecting the power because the customer did not pay their bill, could be projected as not being sensitive to the customer's supplications. Justifications found in the professor's situation relate to health problems (e.g. *J'ai été malade*. 'I was sick. '), tragedy in the family (e.g. *Mon père avait rendu l'âme*. 'My father had died. ') power outage) (e.g. *à cause des délestages réguliers (...) dans mon quartier*. 'Because of regular power outage (...) in my neighborhood. '), misfortune (e.g. *J'ai été victime d'une agression ce matin et les agresseurs ont pris mon cartable contenant mon devoir*. 'I was the victim of an attack this morning and the attackers took away my schoolbag containing my assignment. '), inability to finish on time (e.g. *Je n'ai pas pu terminer à temps*. 'I could not finish on time.')

Greetings are slightly much more employed when students are asking for deadline extension in situation 3 (21 examples) than in S2 (17 instances). Apologies, disarmers and Imposition minimisers (e.g. *Je sais que je n'ai pas encore réglé la facture*. 'I know I haven't paid the bill yet. ') are mostly used in Sit. 2 (28 tokens), where they are associated with grounders to further mitigate requests. Promises and offers mostly occur in Sit. 2 (35 instances) (e.g. *Je vous promets de payer dans les brefs délais*. 'I promise to pay as soon as possible. ' *Monsieur, vous pouvez d'abord prendre une bière*. 'Sir, you can have a beer first. '). We also note that the *getting a pre-commitment strategy* is used only in Sit. 3. One realisation of this external mitigator is *Je voudrais vous demander une faveur*. 'I would like to ask you a favour.'

4.3.1.3 External upgraders

This group consists of speech acts such as complaints, moralizing acts, and disagreements. They appear only in friend and stranger situations. Their pragmatic function is to put more pressure on the interlocutor to take the action requested (S1) or to refrain from taking an unfavorable action for the speaker (S2). Complaints can appear before or after the head acts, as in (19-21).

19) *Ma sœur, c'est comment? Chaque fois que tu fais la cuisine, tu laisses trop de désordre. Pardon, essaye de ranger.* (Friend)
'My sister, what is it? Every time you cook, you leave so much mess. Please, try to tidy up.'

20) *Émilie, fais l'effort de ranger la cuisine. Le désordre que tu as laissé ne me plaît pas.* (Friend)
'Emile, make the effort to tidy the kitchen. I don't like the mess you left.'

21) *Mon frère, s'il te plaît non ne me coupe pas le courant. Je vais faire comment dans le noir?* (Stranger)
'My brother, please no don't disconnect my power. **What am I going to do in the dark?**'

4.3.2 Internal modifiers

The participants used 383 internal modifiers. Their types and frequencies are captured in Table 6. We see that modifiers mostly occur when students ask their professors for an extension of the deadline to submit their assignments in situation 3 (186 tokens) and that internal modifiers with mitigating functions are the dominant devices in the data: they account for 351 occurrences, representing 91.6 % of all internal modifiers. Internal intensifiers occur only when students ask their flatmates to tidy up the kitchen (situation 1).

Table 9: Overall distribution of internal modification

Category of internal modifier	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
Mitigators	73	92	186	351 (91.6%)
Intensifiers	32	0	0	32 (8.4%)
Total	105	92	186	383 (100%)

The various types of internal modifiers attested in the data and their frequencies are presented in Table 10.

Table 10: Distribution of internal modifiers

Type of internal modifier	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
Mitigators	73	92	186	351 (91.6%)
Politeness markers	43	63	128	234 (61%)
Conditional	15	3	24	42 (11%)
Supplication or Permission markers	0	11	17	28 (7.3%)
Downtoners	3	3	9	15 (3.9%)
Consultative devices	0	0	5	5 (1.3%)
Understaters	8	12	3	23 (6%)
Tense (past)	1	0	0	1 (0.3%)
Subjectivizer	3	0	0	3 (0.8%)
Intensifiers	32	0	0	32 (8.4%)
Adverbial intensifiers	9	0	0	9 (2.4%)
Time intensifiers	9	0	0	9 (2.4%)
Lexical uptoners	10	0	0	10 (2.6%)
Insistence markers	4	0	0	4 (1%)
Total	105	92	186	383 (100%)

The results show that, among the mitigators attested, politeness markers are by far the most popular, with 234 instances, followed by the conditional (42 tokens), supplication markers (28 examples), and understaters (23 occurrences). Generally, politeness markers occur at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of request utterances. The results also show that most request utterances contain two or more mitigators. Combinations attested include 'politeness marker + conditional + consultative device as in (22), 'conditional + understater' as in (23), 'politeness marker + past tense + understater' as in (24). Intensifiers include lexical upgraders as in (25), time-adverbials and adverbial intensifiers as in (26) and combinations of intensifiers as in (27).

22) *S'il vous plait monsieur, j'aimerais savoir si je peux rendre mon devoir plus tard.* (Professor)
'Please sir, I would like to know if I can submit my assignment later.'

23) *Madame, pourriez-vous nous accorder encore quelques jours supplémentaires ?* (Professor)
'Madam, could you give some extra days?'

24) *S'il te plait, je voulais juste te demander de ranger ta cuisine.* (Friend)
'Please, I just wanted to ask you to arrange the kitchen.'

25) *S'il te plaît, est-ce que tu peux ranger le bazar que tu as laissé à la cuisine ce matin ?* (Friend)
'Please, can you clean up the mess you left in the kitchen this morning?'

26) *Chaque fois que tu fais la cuisine, tu laisses trop de désordre.* (Friend)
'Each time you cook, you leave too much mess behind.'

27) *La cuisine est très sale et mal organisée. Peux-tu l'arranger rapidement ?* (Friend)
'The kitchen is very dirty and poorly organized. Can you arrange it quickly?'

As far as the situational distribution of internal mitigators is concerned, the results reveal that these devices mostly appear in the professor situation. This choice may be due to the fact that the requester of the favour (the deadline extension) has a lower socio-institutional status and deems it necessary to use strategies that would soften face-threatening aspects of the request in order to convince the interlocutor to respond favourably. In other words, the status-based asymmetrical relationship exerts pressure on the requester to fulfil social and institutional expectations regarding the way in which they ask a favour from a superior. This pressure is visible in the abundant use of internal and external mitigators. Table 10 also indicates that some mitigators seem to be situation-specific. For example, supplication markers occur only in the stranger and professor situations, understaters mostly appear in the stranger situation (12 tokens of the 23 instances attested) (e.g. *Laisse-moi encore un peu de temps.* 'Give me a little more time,'); *Donnez-moi un petit moratoire, un seul jour, seulement jusqu'à demain matin.* 'Give me a little moratorium, just one day, only until tomorrow morning.'). Finally, all the 32 intensifiers in the data were found in the friend situation, where they serve to aggravate requests to peers. Peer

equality seems to be the reason for the abundant use of intensifiers in this situation: there is much freedom to express one's emotional state to a peer and there is less fear of face-threat.

Table 11 shows the overall use of modifiers, internal and external, by the respondents. Overall, external modifiers are much more frequently used than internal modifiers. In terms of situational distribution, the results show that while internal modifiers are slightly much more frequent when speakers ask their flatmates to clean up the kitchen in situation 1, external modifiers are more frequent when asking the employee of the electricity not to disconnect power (situation 2: external modifiers 74.3% vs. internal modifiers 25.7%) and when students ask their professors for a deadline extension (external modifiers 57% vs internal modifiers 43%).

Table 11: Percentages of modifiers per situation

	External modifiers		Internal modifiers	
	N	%	N	%
Friend (S1)	104	49.8%	105	50.2%
Stranger (S2)	266	74.3%	92	25.7%
Professor (S3)	247	57%	186	43%
Total	617	61.7%	383	38.3%

4.4 Address terms

Apart from functioning as attention getters, address terms give a clue to the way the speaker relates or wants to relate to the interlocutor and thus serve as mitigators or aggravators of requests. There are two super-categories of address terms: pronominal address terms and nominal address terms. Let us start with the pronouns of address attested in the data.

4.4.1 Pronominal address terms

Table 12 presents the distribution of the pronominal address terms found in request utterances. of the 454 tokens used, there were 162 instances of *tu* (37.7%), 275 occurrences of *vous* (60.6%), 11 examples of *on* (2.4%), and 6 tokens of *nous* (1.3%).

Table 12: Distribution of pronominal address terms

Type of pronoun	Friend	Stranger	Professor	Total
Tu	137	25	0	162 (35.7%)
Vous	4	137	134	275 (60.6%)
Nous	2	3	1	6 (1.3%)
On	5	6	0	11 (2.4%)
Total	148	171	135	454 (100%)

The dominant pronoun, *vous*, is mostly used in the stranger situation where it serves to express respect for social distance. *Vous* also is abundantly employed in the professor situation where it serves as a mark of respect or deference for the interlocutor for his/her higher social and institutional status (professor). In both cases, the pronoun *vous*, whether in the head act or in supportive moves, *vous* functions as a request mitigator. Interestingly, there is one example of *vous* in the friend situation, as in (28). In this example, the pronoun *vous* serves to chastise a

flatmate for not cleaning up the kitchen. By expressing a kind of distance between the speaker and the hearer, *vous* indicates annoyance or even insult.

- 28) *S'il vous plait, pourriez-vous ranger la cuisine ?* (Friend)
'Please, could you tidy the kitchen?'

The pronoun *tu* is used 162 times and it appears mostly in S1 where it expresses familiarity. This pronoun does not appear in requests to professors (Si3) because it would have been disrespectful to use such a pronoun with superior in a Cameroonian context. However, there are 25 instances of *tu* in S2 where it is meant to signal or create closeness with a stranger in order to accelerate the acceptance of the request or aspects of the request utterance. The results show that the pronoun *on* is used 11 times. In S1, *on* is used as an avoidance strategy, to soften a request that is realised as an ability question as in (29) or as a complaint/moralizing act as in (30).

- 29) *S'il te plait, peut-on mettre un peu de l'ordre dans la cuisine ?*
'Please, can we put some order in the kitchen?'

- 30) *Depuis quand est-ce que l'on finit de préparer et on laisse la cuisine dans cet état ?*
'Since when do we finish the cooking and leave the kitchen in this state?'

In S2, the pronoun *on* is used to soften suggestions as in (31-32). In both examples, the pronoun *on* refers to both parties. It could be replaced by the term *nous*.

- 31) *Pardon on peut s'arranger.*
'Please, we can work things out.'

- 32) *Si vous voulez, on peut d'abord arranger à l'amiable.*
'If you want, we can first settle amicably.'

Finally, the pronoun *nous* is used only 6 times and it generally serves to soften requests by presenting the actions requested as in the interest of both parties as can be seen in (33).

- 33) *Paul, il faut que tu nous ranges la cuisine aujourd'hui.*
'You need to clean up the kitchen (for us) today.'

4.4.2 Nominal address terms

Turning now to nominal address terms and looking at the results presented in Table 13, we note that the participants used a wide variety of terms whose distribution shows significant differences across the three situations.

Table 13: Distribution of nominal address terms

Type of nominal address term	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
First Names	14	0	0	14 (6.6%)
Kinship terms	4	10	0	14 (6.6%)
Endearment terms	2	0	0	2 (0.9%)
Camaraderie / Solidarity terms	14	0	0	14 (6.6%)
Others	1	1	0	2 (0.9%)
Terms of respect and titles	1	65	100	166 (78.4%)
Total	36	76	100	212 (100%)

First of all, the results in Table 13 indicate that of the 212 nominal terms identified, there are 100 tokens in Sit 3, 76 examples in S2, and 36 terms in S1. Secondly, among the nine groups of terms found, the respondents show clear preference for honorifics (*monsieur, madam*), honorifics and titles (*monsieur le professeur, monsieur l'agent*) when addressing interlocutors in S3 and S2. The abundant use of honorifics and titles in requests to professors (S3) is due to the importance of these elements in asymmetrical interactions, where they are used to index social hierarchy and the power imbalance between the student and the professor. These signs of respect for the addressee's higher socio-institutional status are vital pragmatic components, which the students use to acknowledge social and institutional hierarchy and to soften their requests.

In the stranger situation (S2), honorifics are signs of respect for a stranger, an employee of the electricity company. Moreover, the employee has the power to disconnect the customer's electricity supply. The use of honorifics could therefore be considered as a manifestation of deference toward the employee: respect and deference are used to obtain a favourable request response. The terms found in the kitchen situation (S1) include first names, kinship, solidarity, and endearment terms whose function is to indicate closeness, solidarity, affection, etc. Using such terms in a collectivist society like Cameroon is very important because they help to reassure the interlocutor that the request (which appears as a form of reprimanding) does not endanger social bonds. In other words, such terms are mitigators of requests. This also applies to the kinship terms found in S2. Used for relational work, these terms are attempts to remind the interlocutors that the interaction taking place goes beyond the exchange of service and money and that there is a bigger and more important purpose, namely group, family, and community cohesion. Through the kinship terms, the encounter is moved to a family space where the interlocutors put the group's collective face wants in the foreground of the exchange. In the electricity bill situation, such a strategy is intended to maximise the chances of obtaining a favourable reaction: the employee of the electricity company is expected to understand the situation as a family member and to act accordingly as can be seen in (34). The speaker uses *quand même* before the kinship term to exhort the interlocutor to consider their in-group membership as a determining element and grant the requested favour. This also applies to example (35) in which the term *mon frère* is used to set the stage for a possible arrangement or common ground, to accept the offer made in the following speech move and to give the customer some extra-time to pay their bill.

34) *Monsieur, vous êtes quand même mon frère, et vous pouvez me comprendre. S'il vous plait ne me coupez pas le courant, je réglerai ma facture.* (Stranger)

'Sir, you are my brother anyway and you can understand me. Please don't cut off my power, I will pay my bill.'

35) *S'il te plaît mon frère, est-ce qu'on ne pourrait pas trouver un terrain d'entente? Prends ces 1000F pour ta bière en attendant que je passe demain.* (Stranger)

'Please, my brother, can we find some common ground? Take these 1000F for your drink while waiting for me to come by tomorrow.'

It is also interesting to highlight the use of the term *asso* (which means *associate* or *partner*) in S2 as shown in (36). The intent behind this choice is to construct a kind of partnership that guarantees favours for both parties. The term appears in the stereotyped question *on fait comment*, which is used in Cameroon to invite the interlocutor to give a bribe in order to solve a problem or to have a service rendered. In this example, the hearer could reply with *il faut faire quelque chose* or *il faut bien parler* 'You should do something / You have to speak well'^{iv}, which means "Give me some money and I will grant you a moratorium", since the speaker has also indicated that times are hard.

36) *Asso, on fait comment? (...) C'est chaud sur moi.* (Stranger)

'Asso, what should we do? (...) Times are hard.'

5. Conclusion

This article has investigated request strategies by Cameroon French speakers. The analysis was based on data produced by 81 Cameroonian French-speaking students from the University of Yaoundé 1. The findings reveal that the respondents made use of different types of head act strategies as well as internal and external modification devices when making requests to flatmates, strangers, or professors.

With respect to head act strategies, the results show that direct requests were much more used than indirect requests. Direct requests were mostly found in the "electricity bill" situation. The most popular direct request type was the imperative strategy, which was most frequently employed in Sit 2 (power bill). The analysis, however, reveals that imperatives were usually mitigated by means of politeness markers, address terms, and external modifiers. Indirect requests mostly appeared in the form of query preparatory strategy and ability questions were by far the dominant type in the examples.

On the level of internal modification, the findings show that the participants overwhelmingly used mitigators (91.5%) in their request, of which politeness markers, conditional, supplication markers, and downtoners were the most popular. Intensifiers were used only 32 times and they were found only in flatmate/kitchen situation.

On the level of external modification, the results reveal the use of a wide range of additional speech moves, which were classified into the following three categories: a) attention getters, b) mitigating supportive moves, and c) aggravating supportive moves. Overall,

^{iv} Meutem Kamtchueng, L.M. (2015) offers a study of the language of corruption in Cameroon.

attention getters were by far the most frequently used. Within the group of mitigating supportive moves, grounders were the dominant strategy, followed by greetings, promises/offers, and apologies, disarmers and imposition minimizers. Aggravating supportive moves were the group with the lowest frequency and they were used only in Sit 1 (kitchen) and Sit 2. (electricity bill). Finally, the findings show that address terms were abundantly used by the participants. Different types of pronominal and nominal address terms were employed and they contribute, in combination with other elements in the utterances, to softening or intensifying the requests.

The paper is a contribution to the study of pragmatic features in Cameroon French and it adds to a growing body of research on this African variety of French. It also contributes to francophone postcolonial pragmatics, which has received little attention in the African continent. Future studies should undertake a more detailed analysis of request strategies by Cameroonian French speakers, using larger data sets as well as naturally occurring examples, in order to highlight the distinctive nature of Cameroon French requests. Another aspect worth considering is the question of how interlocutors respond to the requests examined in this paper.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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