

SAY PLEASE: THE EFFECT OF THE WORD "PLEASE" IN COMPLIANCE-SEEKING REQUESTS

MICHAEL W. FIRMIN, JANINE M. HELMICK, BRIAN A. IEZZI,
AND AARON VAUGHN
Cedarville University, OH, USA

This study reports the results of an experiment examining whether presenting a request that included the word "please" would facilitate greater compliance than would a request that did not include the word please. We hypothesized that the plead request (incorporating the word please) would elicit higher rates of compliance than would a nonplead request. Participants consisted of 165 male and 139 female undergraduates, aged 18-24, from a private, comprehensive university in the Midwest of the USA. Participants were surveyed by 8 callers, trained to uniformly verbalize the requests for compliance. Results showed that a greater proportion of participants in the nonplead condition complied than did in the plead condition ($\chi^2 = 6.432$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$). The implications of this analysis are discussed.

Request-seeking interactions and compliance gaining have been heavily studied areas in psychology for many years. Previous research has focused on the circumstances prior to the presentation of a request (Goranson & Berkowitz, 1966; Guéguen, 2001), the effects of emotions on compliance (Dolinski, 2001; Tannenbaum, Macauley, & Norris, 1966), and techniques the compliance seeker can use (Hertzog & Scudder, 1996; Millar, 2001).

Hertzog and Bradac (1984) studied various domains of compliance-gaining situations. They created five dimensions: the resistance to persuasion dimension, the value/rules dimension, the gender relevant/gender irrelevant dimension, the dominance dimension, and the long-term/short-term effects dimension. The results of their study show that the communicator's style and personality influence the strategy used to gain compliance in various situations. Buller, LePoire,

Michael W. Firmin, Janine M. Helmick, Brian A. Iezzi, and Aaron Vaughn, Cedarville University, Ohio, USA.

Appreciation is due to reviewers including: Joseph Schwarzwald, PhD, Department of Psychology, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan 52901, Israel; Email: <JSCHWARZ@MAIL.BULAC.IL>; Professor Elizabeth Buckwalter, Bryan College, PO Box 700, Dayton, TN 37321, USA; Email: <elbuckwalter@bryan.edu>; Professor Gene Sale, Palm Beach Atlantic University, 901 S. Flagler Drive, West Palm Beach, FL 33401, USA; Email: saleg@pbau.edu <mailto:saleg@pbau.edu>

Please address correspondence and reprint requests to: Michael Firmin, Cedarville University, 251 N. Main Street, Cedarville, OH 45314 USA. Phone: (937) 766-7970; Fax: (937) 766-7971; Email: <firmin@cedarville.edu>

Aune, and Eloy (1992) examined the effect that speech rate has on compliance. Research supported their hypothesis that as the speech rate of the speaker and the speech rate of the listener became more similar, the perceived social attractiveness of the speaker would increase, thereby increasing compliance. A speaker who appeared more socially attractive to a listener would be able to elicit more compliance to a request for help.

Howard (1990) was interested in the effect that one's public statement of one's feelings has on that person's willingness to comply with a request. His study of the "foot-in-the-mouth" phenomenon confirmed that participants would have internal pressure to behave in a manner compatible with a public statement of their well-being, thus being more compliant with a charitable request. One explanation that Howard gave for the increased compliance suggested that participants were simply responding to the politeness of the solicitor. Aune and Basil (1994) further evaluated Howard's study, suggesting that the conversation between the caller and participant may have built the perception of intimacy; participants may have simply been responding in a manner consistent with the perceived relationship. The results of the study confirmed their hypothesis that a greater perception of relationship leads to more compliance.

Sanders and Fitch (2001) took these theories one step farther. While acknowledging the role of relationship within compliance, Sanders and Fitch contended there is no one method that will work in all compliance-seeking situations. Rather, compliance seeking is a complex interaction between the seeker and the target person and cannot be reduced to a one-sided script. In addition to what actually occurs during the request-seeking conversation, the situation is part of a larger whole in which the target person's immediate actions, surroundings, and culture play an important role. Sanders and Fitch also mentioned the shared social-cultural meanings behind requests or statements, which can profoundly influence one's interpretation of, and response to, a request. It is within the context of the conversation that requests are made and compliance is negotiated.

Dolinski, Nawrat, and Rudak (2001) focused on the difference between dialogue and monologue in the compliance-seeking situation. *Dialogue*, as defined by Dolinski et al., is *conversation carried out by two acquaintances*, whereas *monologue* occurs *between strangers*. In cohesion with the previous studies, they found that dialogue leads to greater compliance. Again, as Sanders and Fitch (2001) proposed, Dolinski et al. found that the content of the dialogue is not important, so long as it occurs. Aune and Basil's (1994) theory on perception of intimacy fits the dialogue/monologue situation as well. By creating conversation that is closer to the type experienced between acquaintances, relationships are built (at least for the duration of the conversation) and compliance increases.

Based on the previously mentioned studies, we designed the current experiment to examine whether presenting a request which included the word "please"

would facilitate greater compliance than would a request that did not include the word please. Using a controlled monologue situation (as defined by Dolinski et al., 2001) and furthering Aune and Basil's (1994) theory of perceived relationship, we added please to the request, predicting that it would add a touch of intimacy and perceived relationship, thus enhancing the likelihood of compliance. Also, following the theory of Sanders and Fitch (2001) in regard to the influence of the social-cultural meanings behind statements, it was predicted that if the word please was added to a request, participants would fall back on the manners they were taught as a child – that is, say please when requesting something and comply with a request preceded by the word please. Based upon the research of Buller et al. (1992) concerning speech rate, if speech rate is controlled the word please will still remain the emphasis of the request and serve as a valid variable. We hypothesized that the plead request (incorporating the word please) would elicit higher rates of compliance than would the nonplead (control) request.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants included 304 students, aged 18-24, randomly selected from a private, comprehensive university in the Midwest of the USA: 157 males and females were randomly assigned to the control group, and 147 to the experimental group. Eight students – four males and four females – were thoroughly trained to make telephone calls using a uniform script. The callers were separated into two groups: two males and two females using the control request, and two males and two females using the experimental plead request. The two groups were blind to each other in order to control any confounding variables.

PROCEDURE

All phone calls were made on a Thursday evening between 7:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. The conversation went as follows:

Hi is _____ there?

[Wait for response]

Hi, my name is _____ (all male/female callers used the same alias), and I am raising money for the Hunger Relief Committee. The reason why I am calling is that I will be on campus soon with some home-made chocolate chip cookies and the proceeds will be used to provide food for a homeless shelter in _____ (nearby town). I am only asking that you buy one cookie, and they are only 50 cents each.

Will you commit to purchasing a cookie? (Please?)

The only difference between the control condition and the experimental condition was the addition of the independent variable, the word please. The callers

memorized the script and were trained intensively to repeat it uniformly in order to eliminate the confounding variables of speech rate, voice intonation, and urgency of the presentation. If participants responded to the request with a question regarding the delivery of the cookies, callers replied, "I will send a representative to your dorm." Other questions were answered with the statements, "You may purchase as many cookies as you would like," or, "I am just looking for a commitment at this time. If you are unable to make a commitment, I understand." Callers did not communicate to the participant any information other than what was provided. After the participant had responded to the request, the experiment was concluded.

After the data were collected, we emailed each participant who agreed to purchase cookies and let them know when and where the cookies would be sold. True to our word, there were home-made chocolate chip cookies, and we did sell them at each dorm for 50 cents a piece. The proceeds and left-over cookies were then donated to a homeless shelter. Due to the nature of the experiment, we decided that a debriefing session would actually decrease the participants' self-esteem by shifting the focusing of their benevolence to the experiment, so we did not conduct a debriefing.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the numbers of compliant and noncompliant responses obtained from the plead and nonplead conditions. The plead request resulted in a 65.3% ($N = 96$) compliance rate, while the nonplead condition produced a 79.0% compliance rate ($N = 124$). A chi-square test of independence was performed and the association between type of request and compliant response was significant ($\chi^2 = 6.432$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$).

TABLE 1
OBSERVED FREQUENCY OF REQUEST COMPLIANCE

Condition	Compliance outcome		
	yes	no	totals
Plead request	96 (65.3%)*	51 (34.7%)	147
Nonplead request	124 (79.0%)	33 (21.0%)	157

*Row Percentage

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not the word please has an effect on compliance. Based on previous research, it was hypothesized that the plead request would gain greater compliance than would a nonplead request. The results disconfirmed our hypothesis; the nonplead request had a significantly higher rate of compliance than did the plead request. We did a further examination on the caller's gender versus the type of response obtained and found no significant correlation between these two variables. Therefore, we attributed the difference in responses completely to the type of request.

One possible explanation for this is that the plead request was too idyllic. On a conservative campus where students are frequently bombarded with requests for charitable donations, a friendly caller selling too-good-to-be-true home-made cookies for a reasonable price for a charitable cause and topping the whole how-could-you-pass-up-this-opportunity? speech with please might very well have been too polite and the participant reacted with suspicion, wondering what the catch was. Please is often used as a persuasive term, and tacked on the end of a request that does not need persuasion might make the target person feel as though the compliance seeker is twisting his or her arm.

Another explanation is that the word please may have slightly altered the participants' perception of the request. Participants were asked to make a commitment to purchase one cookie; however, it was left to the participant to determine the strength of the word commitment. Some participants agreed to purchase cookies flippantly, most likely reasoning that they would buy them if they were around and had money at the time, but it was not a big deal if they did not purchase one. However, when please was attached to the request, a heightened sense of personal intimacy and obligation may have been implied, causing the participant to reevaluate the cost of making a commitment and to refrain from doing so if s/he could not definitely carry it out.

Finally, the decreased compliance in the plead request may have been a combination of the previous reasons. In this situation, the participant's motivation for compliance was largely his/her desire to help the hungry and not the satisfaction of his/her own desire for cookies. In the control condition, the emphasis was left on the charitable request, providing participants with the opportunity to help those in need. It is possible that in the experimental condition, the word please, being the final word, made the request more personal and the emphasis was shifted from helping those in need to helping the caller personally. This explanation fits the perception-of-relationship theory proposed by Aune and Basil (1994), and also the statement Sanders and Fitch (2001) made concerning the importance of the context in which a statement is made. Therefore, in this case, it is possible that the word please did indeed make the request more personable as we original-

ly hypothesized, but helping the caller did not carry as strong a motivation as did directly helping those in need.

Although the results of this study were surprising, they are far from definitive. While the word please was not effective for selling cookies for a charitable cause, that does not mean it does not have strong effects in different situations. More research needs to be done in this area. A smaller replication of the present experiment with a carefully controlled follow-up study may provide interesting and helpful information as to which participants would actually follow through and purchase cookies, thus giving insight into their level of commitment based on the request that was presented. It would also be helpful to alter the experiment so that there is no confusion whatsoever about what is being requested, omitting the vagueness of the word "commit" or making it so that the participant must act upon his/her decision immediately.

Finally, it would be interesting to see a study done on the marketing issue to determine whether or not the placement of the word please did indeed shift the focus of the request. This could be done by placing the word please at the beginning or in the middle of the request as opposed to at the end.

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