

# Getting Things Done at Work: An Evidence Base for Teaching Complex Requests

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# The AMEP

- DIAC funded
- Long history
- Settlement focus
- National, competency-based curriculum designed to fit Australian Qualifications Framework
- Competitive tender
- Different kinds of providers (AMES, college, private college)



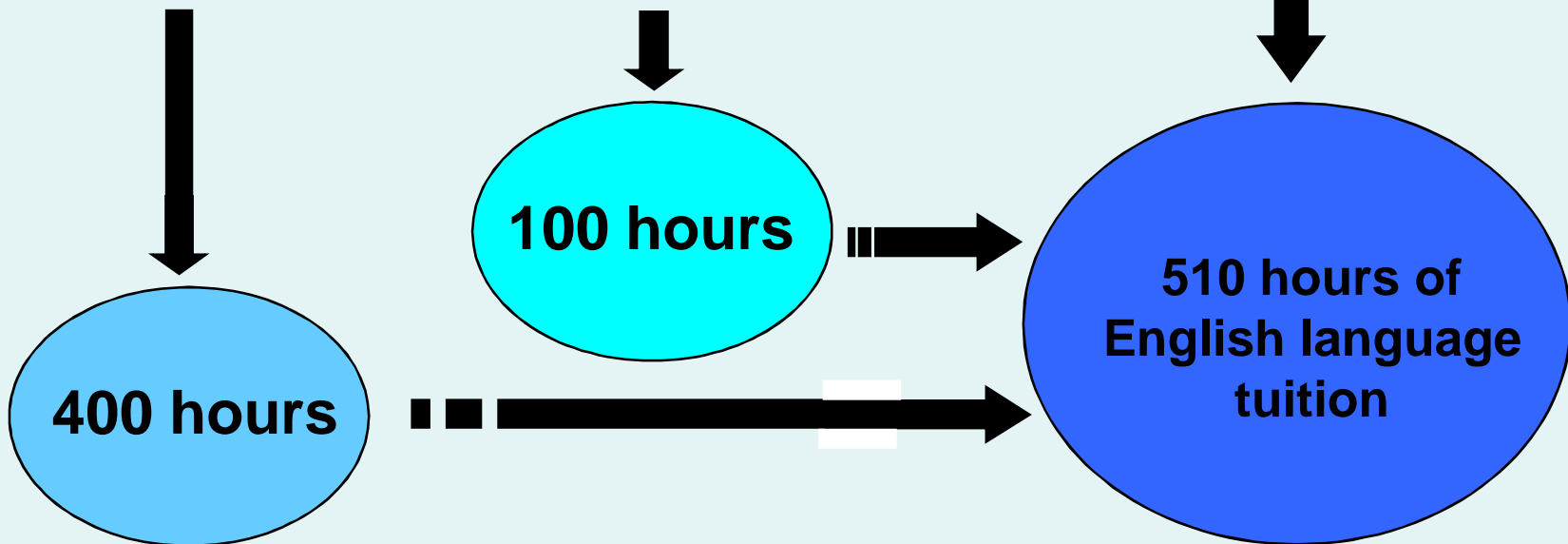
# Eligibility

## Special Preparatory Program

- Humanitarian entrants
- under 25 yrs old
- with 7 yrs or less schooling

- Humanitarian entrants
- 25 yrs and older
- with difficult pre-migration experiences

- All eligible adult migrants
- 18 yrs and older
- lack proficiency in English



# National Curriculum - licensed

## The Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) at four levels:

**Certificate 3 for intermediate learners**

**Certificate 2 for post beginners**

**Certificate 1 for beginners**

**Pre-CSWE for pre-literate learners**

# The Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE)

## Certificate 3: intermediate learners

- Provide an explanation
- Demonstrate understanding of spoken information text, instructions, a problematic exchange and a personal viewpoint
- Participate in casual conversation with topic changes, a transactional phone conversation and an interview
- Deliver a short oral presentation

- Read a procedural text
- Write an informal letter or e-mail
- Write formal letters of enquiry and of complaint

news ~ working hours ~ mobile phones ~ complaint ~ money ~  
share house ~ counsellor ~ overdue book

# AMEP Research Centre

- Funded by Department of Immigration And Citizenship
- Focus in an environment of competition
- Brief
  - research to support AMEP
    - Variety of projects, briefs in consultation with profession
  - professional development for teachers
    - Forums, workshops, web site, assessment task bank
  - publications
    - Reports, fact sheets, class and distance learning materials



# Motivation: Making complex requests projects

- Appropriate requests are:
  - High stakes
  - Challenging to do well for learners and newcomers
- Providers described some Dinka speakers as assertive
- Very little on literature on
  - a) Interactive behaviour of learners from this part Africa
  - b) No teaching material on this
- Native speaking data on complex requests from previous study for comparison



# Context

- Dinka – largest tribal group in southern Sudan
- Refugees from civil war and program of 'Islamicisation'
- Traditionally pastoralists, often many years in refugee camps



# Making complex requests project

## Aims

- To understand complex requests in English by Dinka speakers from Sudan and other background learners
- To compare these to requests by native speakers of Australian English
- To provide an evidence base for classroom materials
- To raise awareness among teachers

# Perspective

- Situations they are likely to encounter
- Intuition notoriously unreliable
- Tasks taken from AMEP national curriculum
- Pedagogical perspective, i.e. how to understand and address the issues
  - Notions of NS (e.g. Davies 2003)
  - NS comparison/ deficit models (e.g. House & Kasper, 2000; Dippold, 2005)
  - Critical perspectives – 2-way nature of communication, racism



- What is a complex request?
- How do we do them in workplace environments?



# Procedure

- 2 roleplay tasks from Cert III (with teacher)
- Dinka background students at Cert III (intermediate)
- Background information, roleplay performance and comments on why
- Analysis using ATLAS
- Comparison with native speakers and learners from other (mixed) backgrounds



# Task 1: Requesting annual leave

## Participant Card

You have 4 weeks annual leave available this year. You would like to take 3 weeks leave now, even though it is a busy time at your workplace

Talk to your manager about this situation, explain why you want to take the leave now and negotiate a solution

## Interlocutor Card

You are the manager of a workplace. One of your employees has applied to take 3 weeks of their 4 weeks annual leave now.

It is a particularly busy time at your workplace. Find out why he/she wants to take leave now. Explain that employees normally take leave at Christmas when things are quieter. Ask the employee to suggest ways to resolve the situation

# Task 2: Changing job interview

## Participant Card

You have an appointment for a job interview with an employment agency tomorrow. The time that has been arranged is not convenient for you.

Go to the agency, introduce yourself and explain the situation

Try and arrange another time for the interview

## Interlocutor Card

You work at an employment agency. A job seeker calls in and wants to change the interview time you have arranged for him/her tomorrow, claiming that it is not convenient. Find out why the time is inconvenient. Point out that there are a number of applicants for the job and a limited time set aside for interviews. Ask the job seeker to suggest ways to resolve the situation

## Areas to explore

- **Sociocultural issues:** transfer of cultural values e.g. learners incorrectly assesses rights and obligations of the situation, what the underlying 'game' is, what kind of strategies are usual, what stance to take etc.
- **Pragmalinguistic:** learners are not aware of the range of mitigating devices available, their force or how they are used, by whom and when etc.



# The data: Total 180 dialogues

3 teachers conducting 2 role play tasks with:

**30 NNS (15 m/ 15 f)**

**30 NS (15 m/ 15 f)**

1 teacher conducting 2 role play tasks with :

**30 DS (24 m/ 6 f)**

	<b>M</b>		<b>F</b>	
	<b>Task 1</b>	<b>Task 2</b>	<b>Task 1</b>	<b>Task 2</b>
<b>NNS</b>	15	15	15	15
<b>NS</b>	15	15	15	15
<b>DS</b>	24	24	6	6

# Aspects of mitigation coded

- Directness/ assertiveness of requests (request formulae)
- Syntactic modifications to requests
- Lexical additions to requests and support moves
- Propositional support for requests

(adapted CCSARP; Yates, 2000, 2005)

- Evidence of sociocultural values: relational work and stance (e.g. greetings, address forms, level of formality) type and sequence of acts

# Directness of request proper

## Apparently assertive (direct)

*I want* to change the time

## Apparently advisory (conventionally indirect)

*Maybe I could* take the extra week I haven't had yet

## Apparently negotiable (conventionally indirect)

*So could we* sort of do something about my leave now

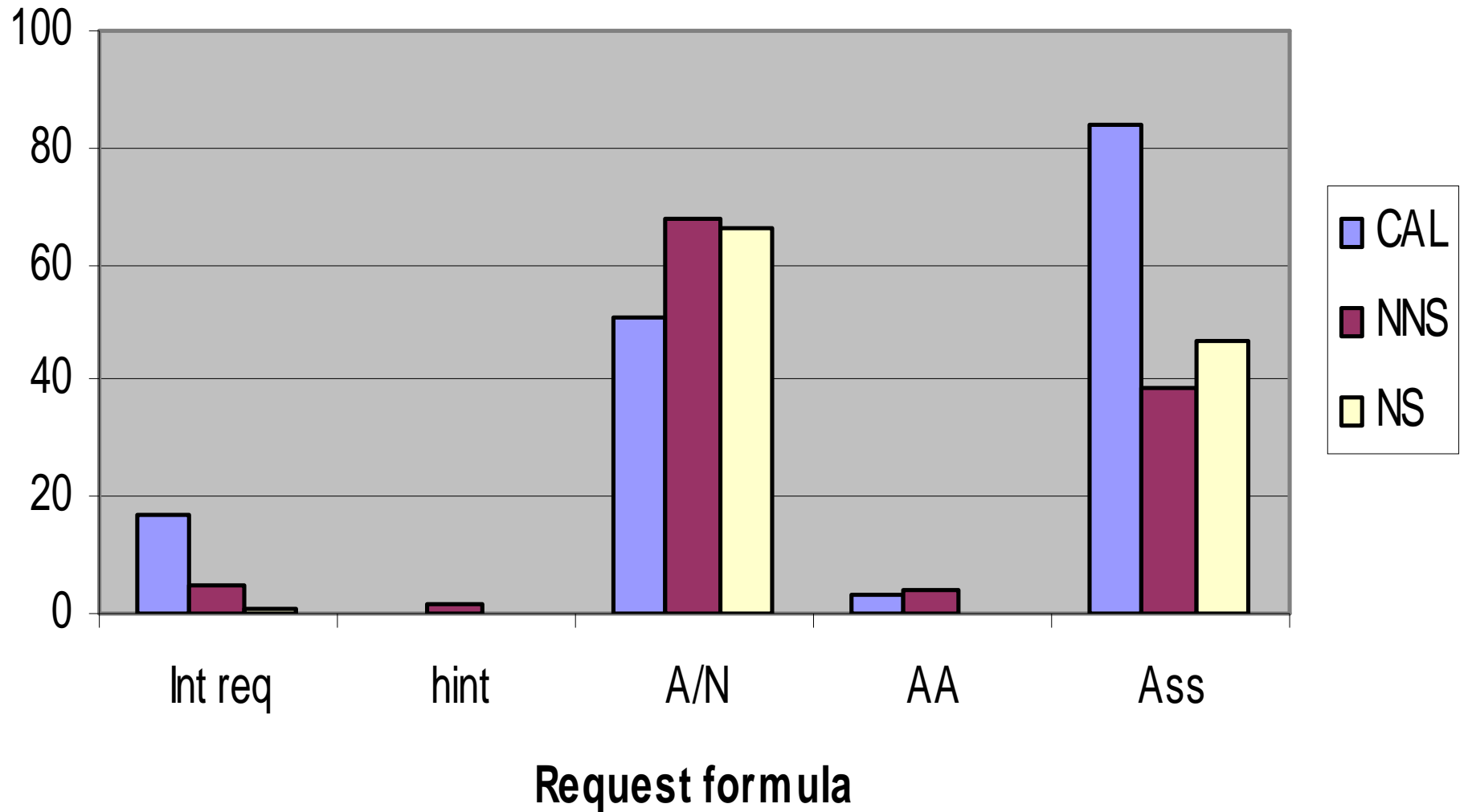
## Non-explicit negotiable (hints)

*I really need to know what leave is available to me*

## Interlocutor request

Interlocutor obliged to make request

# Request formula used by three groups



# Directness of requests: Findings

- DS used more direct requests and fewer *apparently negotiable* (e.g. can you....) than either NS or NNS
- DS (17:1f,14 m) left it to the interviewer to make the request more often



# Syntactic mitigation

## Past marking

I just *wanted* to ...; I *was just wondering* if I could have a minute of your time

## Modals

I'd like to take some annual leave; I was wondering if we *might* ...

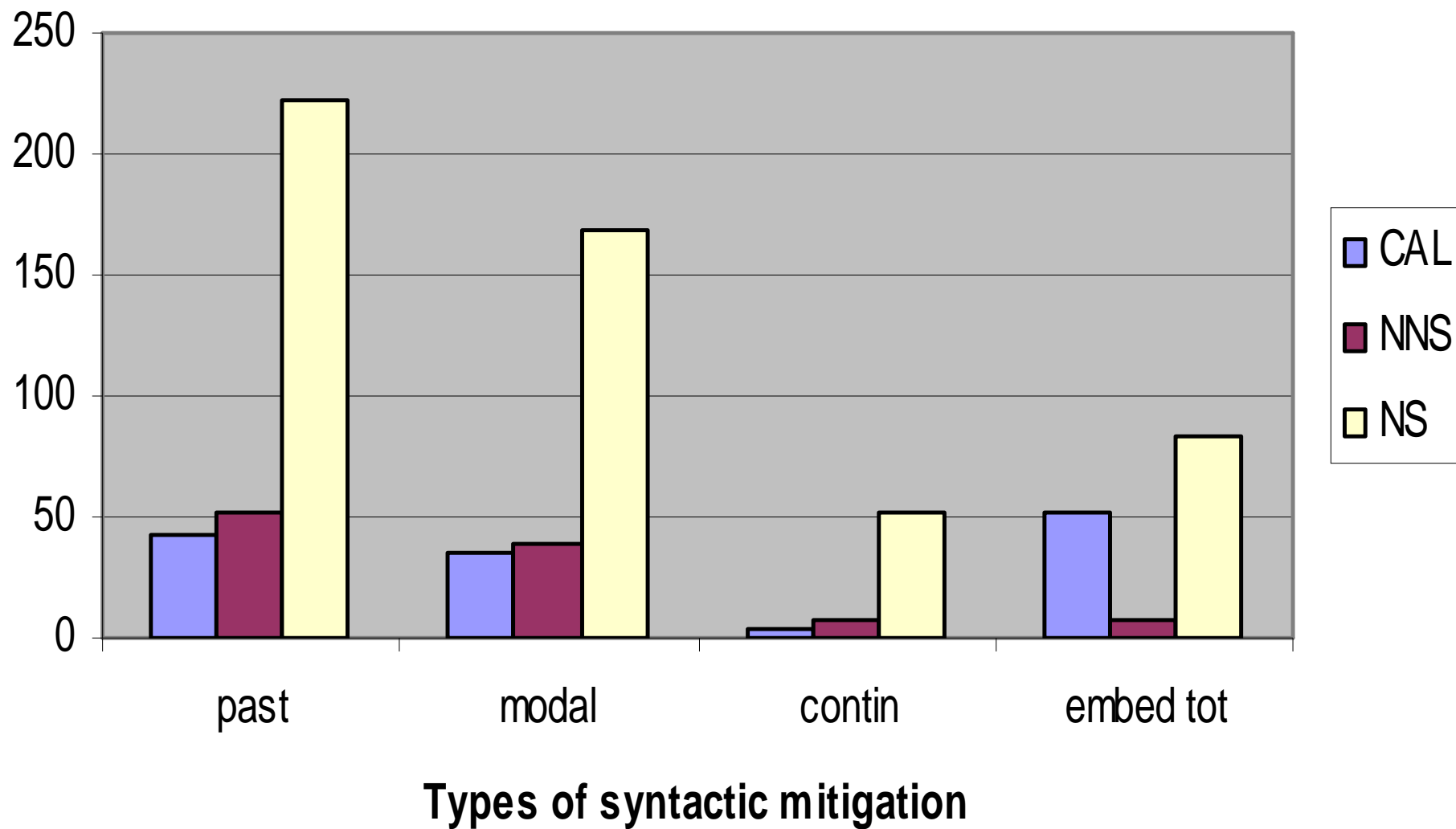
## Continuous

I'm really *hoping* to ...

## Embedding

*I was just wondering if it would be possible*

# Syntactic mitigation



# Syntactic mitigation

DS used fewer *past, modal* (f more) and *continuous* forms than NS, as other NNS

DS used fewer *embedding* forms than NS, but used them more than NNS (51/8/84)

Why? Greater grammatical competence?  
(Of these 14/51 non-standard)



# Lexical Mitigation

## Downtoner- just

I *just* need these three weeks to finish that

## Understater

I really would *appreciate* being able to

## Hedge

*Maybe* I could take the take days that I haven't had yet

## Consultative device

*would that be okay with you?*

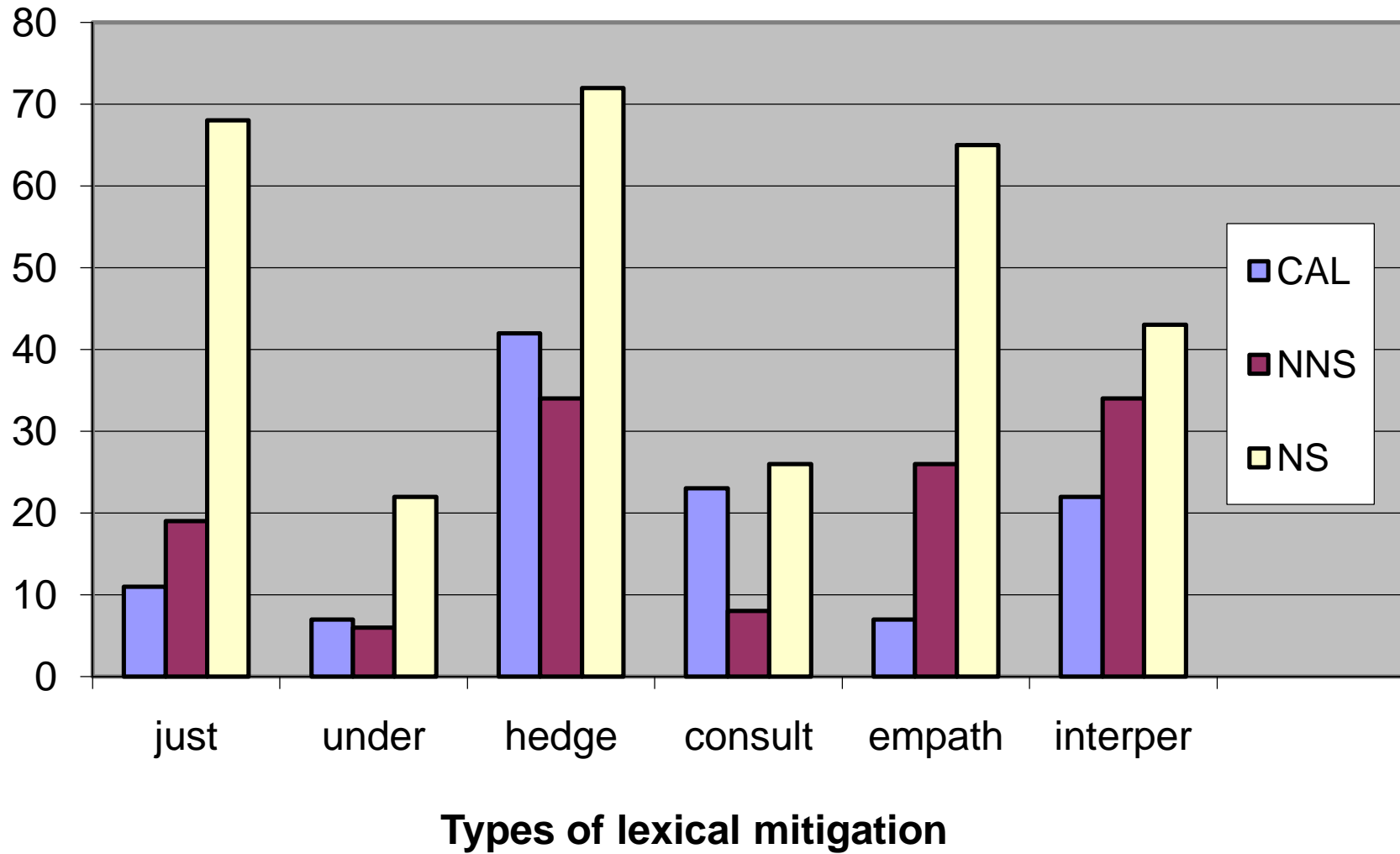
## Empathetic marker

*I think/ know/ realise/ feel..., I [can] understand, appreciate..,*

## Interpersonal marker

*You know what I mean.. you see... you know....*

# Lexcial mitigation



# Findings: Lexical mitigation

- DS like NNS < 'just' and *understaters*'
- DS used *hedging* a little > NNS, but < than NS
- DS used *empathy, interpersonal markers* and upgrading < NNS and NS
- DS used more *consultative devices*, as did NS, but.....



## DS: interpersonal markers for shared knowledge not connection

DS < interpersonal markers (22) - a different impact:

- P18: as *you know* you are my manager,
- P 5: Umm *you know* I am going to finish at two o'clock  
cf

NS (43) used them to signal connection:

- P38: it's just like um *you know* like I said
- P41: *you know* I don't mind working
- P41: working extra extra time *you know* during Christmas and that

# DS projected less empathy

DS (7)

- P 3: You know, *I know I know* we are so busy now, I know
- P24: I *know* you are busy, all are busy

cf NS (67)

- I *realise* how hard it is
- I *know* that it's not a lot of ahm ahhh notice
- I *understand* I really do

# DS = NS , but 'passed the buck'

DS - more *consultative phrases* leaving responsibility with boss/system .....

P 1: *could you mind* to arrange for me

P 2: *what would you* advise me to do

P18: *may you grant me* if possible

Cf NS

P39: *okay is there any way I could* make that later in the day

P40: *how about if I tried to* organise something with one of the staff members

# Propositional Mitigation

## Greeting/name

[Name] hi, have you got a moment

## Context

I have some holiday left

## Reason

ah well my wife at the moment she's a bit ill

## Preparator

I was wondering if I could have a minute of your time

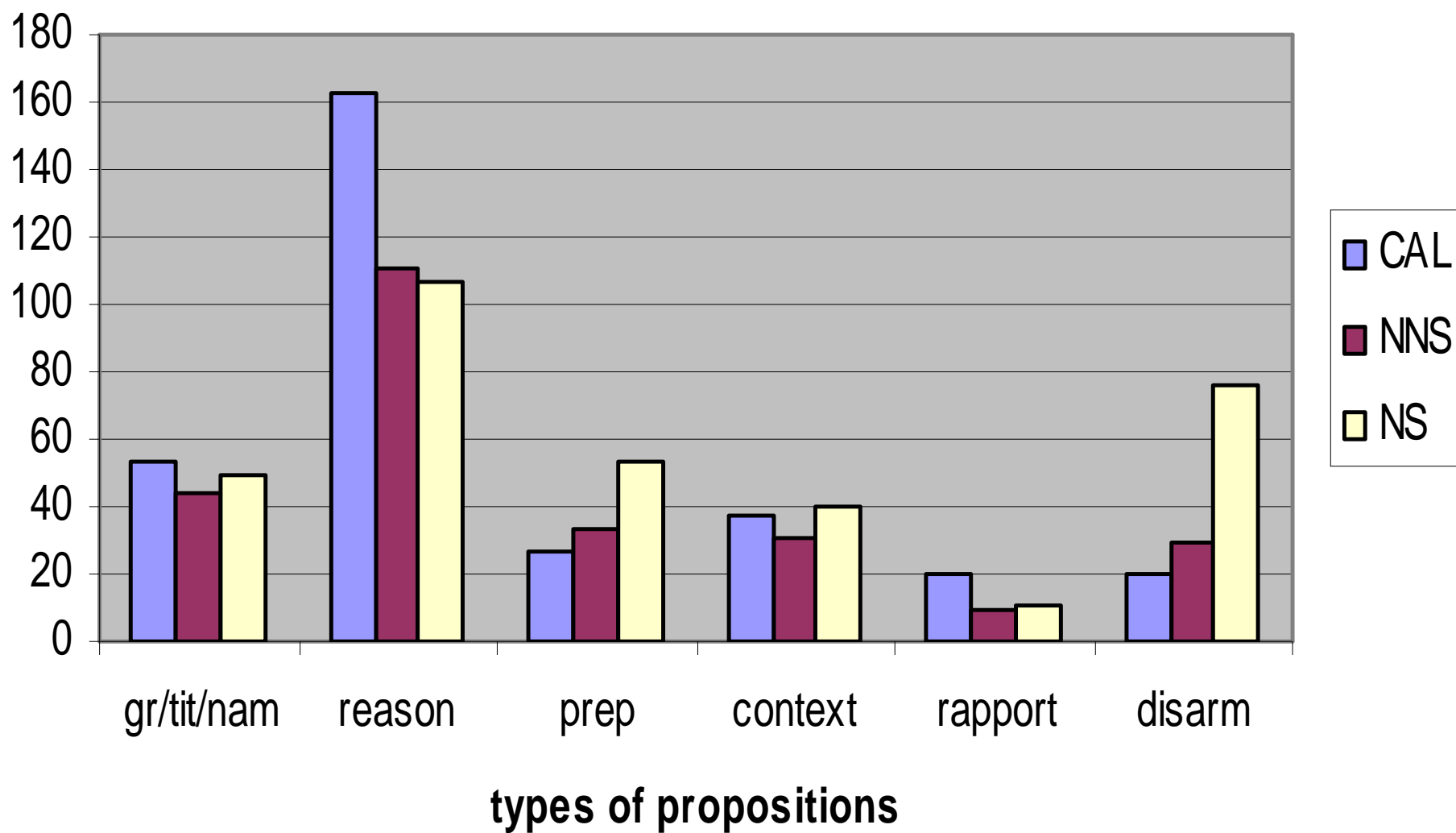
## Rapport

ooh I've got to do a bit of grovelling

## Disarmer

I know it's not a good time of the year

# Propositional mitigation



# Propositional mitigation: Findings

- DS reasons > NNS or NS
- DS used context > NNS, like NS
- DS used rapport > NNS or NS, but DS only 2 – hierarchical
  - P18 as you know you are my manager,.....and with your personal consent maybe you change this time for me to be today

cf NS - 4 with some humour

- P36 I know this sounds really silly but I'm I'm an absolutely dopey Essendon supporter and I'm queuing up for tickets
- DS used preparators and disarmers < NNS or NS
- DS Reasons repeated cf NS developed



# Request stance and performance

NS

- Signalled empathy and mutual responsibility thro':
  - disarmers,
  - empathetic markers,
  - interpersonal markers,
  - consultative devices
- Prepared for their request with pre-acts such as:
  - 'let's talk' routines,
  - some humour

# Request stance and performance

DS – more often:

- Left it to interlocutor to work out a solution
- Overtly signalled hierarchy
- Used direct request formulae
- Repeated powerful reasons

DS less often:

- Used syntactic and lexical mitigation
- Projected empathy
- Successfully marked interpersonal connection

# Sociocultural issues

- One third
  - had never had paid employment
  - or casual only
- Tasks and sociocultural conventions unfamiliar
  - paid leave, rights and obligations
  - relative role of work
  - E.g. P 15; concept of annual leave was new, needed to check acceptable reasons



# Different views of work/boss

Reasons that could not be refused, e.g.

P 3: 'In Sudan if you give a reason such as you need to go and help your community, do something for your family, it is a very strong reason and the manager would be looked down upon if they refused. Work is not seen as being more important than doing something for your family or community...If for example you said your mother is in hospital your manager likely to offer to go and visit with you..'

# What might Aussies expect?

- Fewer direct requests
- Less (repetition of) reasons/context
- More syntactic and lexical mitigation
- More interpersonal connection
- Less devolution of problem to interlocutor/ more mutual responsibility
- More attempt to disarm and sort out a solution
- Delivery?



# Some implications for teaching of sociocultural issues

- Concepts and system in Australia on workplace conditions/rights/ responsibilities
- Analysis/ discussion of tenor of workplace interactions, stance etc.
- Awareness-raising for employers on importance of family/community



# Implications for teaching pragmalinguistic issues

- Request forms
- Alternatives to repeated 'reasons' for persuasion:
  - The use of lexis to soften
    - Just, word choice, empathy, interpersonal markers, consultative devices
  - The use of syntax to soften
    - Past, modal, continuous, embedding (chunks)
  - Means of establishing interpersonal connection
  - Staging of requests, preparation, taking responsibility
  - Use of consultative devices in negotiating
  - Delivery e.g. signalling empathy, disarming



# References

- Yates, L. (2010). Dinkas downunder: Dinkas downunder: Request performance in simulated workplace interaction. In G. Kasper, Nguyen, H.t., Yoshimi, D. R. & Yoshika, J. K. (Eds.), *Pragmatics and language learning, volume 12* (pp. 113-140), University of Hawai'i: National Foreign Language Resource Center.
- Wigglesworth, G. & Yates, L. (2007). Mitigating difficult requests in the workplace: what learners and teachers need to know. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(4), 791-803.

## Thanks also to:

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- Gillian Wigglesworth
- And others who worked on later phases



**Thank you**  
**Any questions?**



## Average by gender

	CAL			NNS			NS		
	m	f	tot	m	f	tot	m	f	tot
Int req	0.7	0.2	0.6	0	0.3	0.2	0	0.1	0
A/N	1.7	1.7	1.7	2	2.5	2.3	2.3	2.1	2.2
AA		0.2		0.2	0.1	0.1			
Ass	2.8	2.7	2.8	1.1	1.5	1.3	1.8	1.3	1.6



## Average by gender

	CAL			NNS			NS		
	m	f	tot	m	f	tot	m	f	tot
<b>past</b>	1.4	1.7	1.4	2.7	0.7	1.7	6.7	8.1	7.4
<b>modal</b>	1	2	1.2	1.9	0.7	1.3	4.8	6.5	5.63
<b>contin</b>	0.2	0	0.1	0.4	0.1	0.3	1.7	1.7	1.7
<b>embed tot</b>	1.2	1.3	1.7	0.4	0.1	0.3	2.4	3.2	2.8



## Average by gender

	CAL			NNS			NS		
	m	f	tot	m	f	tot	m	f	tot
<b>just</b>	0.4	0.2	0.4	1	0.3	0.6	2.5	2	2.27
<b>under</b>	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.6	0.9	0.73
<b>hedge</b>	1.5	1.2	1.4	1.4	0.9	1.1	2.1	2.7	2.4
<b>consult</b>	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.8	0.9	0.87
<b>empath</b>	0.2	0.5	0.2	0.9	0.8	0.9	2.3	2.1	2.17
<b>interper</b>	0.7	1	0.7	1.8	0.5	1.1	1.4	1.5	1.43
<b>upgrad</b>	3	1.7	2.8	5.6	5.1	5.4	5.5	6.1	5.8



## Average by gender

	CAL			NNS			NS		
	m	f	tot	m	f	tot	m	f	tot
<b>gr/tit/nam</b>	1.8	1.8	1.8	1.5	1.4	1.5	1.5	1.7	1.63
<b>reason</b>	6.2	6.2	5.4	3.4	4	3.7	3.3	3.9	3.57
<b>prep</b>	0.9	0.8	0.9	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.5	2.1	1.77
<b>context</b>	1.3	0.8	1.2	1.2	0.9	1	1.3	1.4	1.33
<b>rapport</b>	0.8	0.2	0.7	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.37
<b>disarm</b>	0.7	0.5	0.7	1.1	0.8	1	2.7	2.4	2.53

