

# *If-you* and interpersonal meaning in women's instructive texts (1700-1899)

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'Los mecanismos interpersonales en los textos instructivos especializados, domésticos y no domésticos, escritos por mujeres en inglés moderno,' PID2021-125928NB-I00

# Introduction and research questions



## Historical context

Instructive texts like recipes and manuals served dual purposes: conveying knowledge and shaping writer-reader relationships through linguistic strategies like mitigation.



## Research focus

This study examines the "If you..." construction as a politeness marker in women's instructive texts between 1700-1899, using the CoWITE18 and CoWITE19 corpora.



## Key questions

- How frequently is "If you..." used in each century?
- What forms are most common?
- What do these patterns reveal about changing discursive strategies and social contexts?



# Mitigation in historical instructive texts

## Definition

Mitigation refers to linguistic strategies that soften potentially face-threatening acts like orders or criticisms, helping preserve the reader's "face" while maintaining writer's authority.

## Dual purpose

In women's instructive texts, mitigation made instructions more palatable while strengthening the relational tone between writer and reader, particularly important in domestic contexts.

## Cultural specificity

These politeness forms were historically and culturally specific, reflecting not just linguistic norms but also strategies of deference and inclusion appropriate to their historical context.





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Dominated by relational and deferential tone in instructive texts, with elaborate politeness markers reflecting social norms of the period.

Shifting literacy rates, changing domestic roles, and emerging class distinctions began influencing instructional language.

Industrialization, rising literacy, and working-class readership led to more direct, functional language where efficiency took precedence over elaborate politeness.



## Ideational function

Conditionals establish logical and hypothetical relations, expressing cause, contingency, or possible outcomes in instructive sequences.

Example: "If you add sugar, the mixture will thicken" lays out a clear, causal sequence of actions.

## Interpersonal function

Beyond conveying steps, conditionals mitigate directives, softening instructions and framing them as suggestions or possibilities.

This reduces imposition on the reader and creates a more collaborative tone between writer and reader.

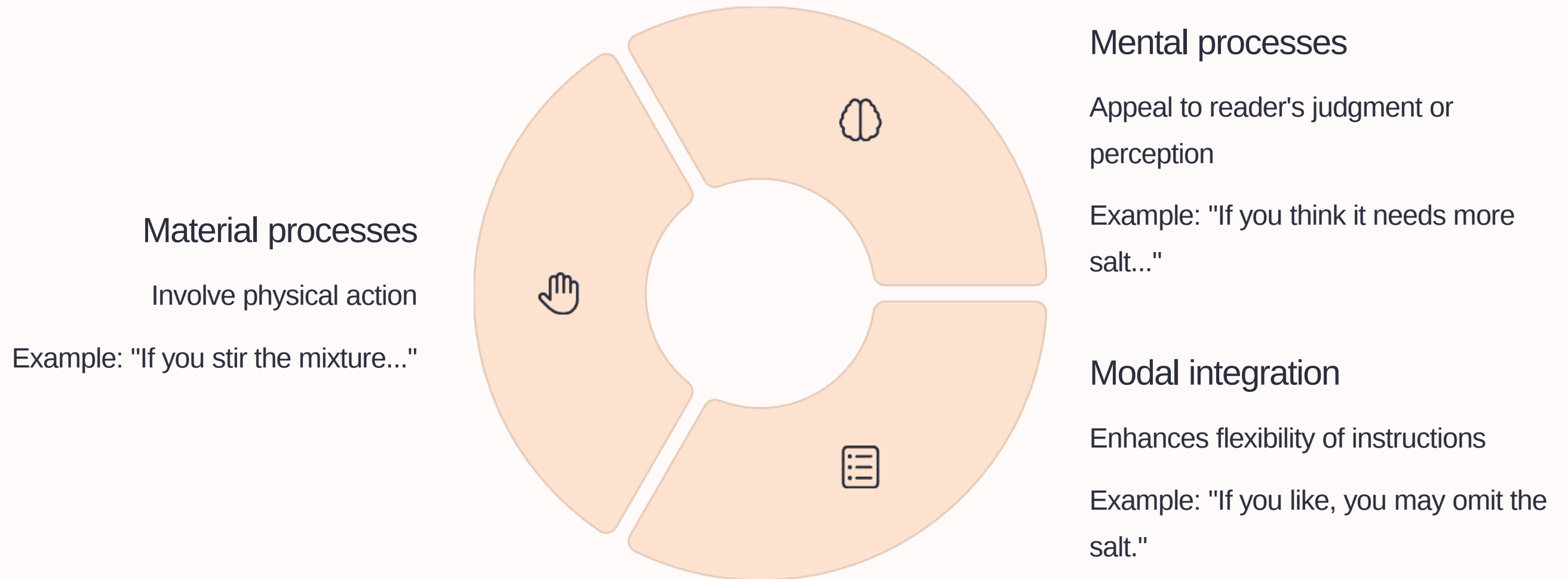
## Textual function

This refers to how language organises information in coherent and cohesive ways. In our case, "if you..." clauses contribute to text flow, helping segment instructions and frame options clearly for the reader, often marking secondary, backgrounded or optional actions.



# Systemic functional approach to "If-you" constructions

# Types of processes in "If-you" constructions



# 18th Century Patterns



## **Common forms**

Forms like "If you please" or "If you think" were prevalent, reflecting more elaborate politeness conventions.



## **Reader engagement**

These constructions actively engaged the reader while reducing imposition, creating a collaborative relationship.



## **Domestic context**

Reflected the importance of maintaining proper social relations within domestic spheres where women operated.



## **Textual function**

Beyond politeness, these constructions helped organize discourse and structure interaction between writer and reader.



# 19th century shifts

## Industrialization impact

The rise of industrial processes and mass production influenced language toward greater efficiency and functionality, even in domestic texts.

## Changing readership

Rising literacy rates and the emergence of working-class readers created demand for more direct, practical instructional language.

## Evolving gender roles

Shifting domestic responsibilities and women's roles in society affected how instructive texts were written and the authority they claimed.



# Comparative analysis

| Feature                  | 18th century                                    | 19th century                               |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Frequency of "If you..." | Higher frequency, especially in elaborate forms | Declining frequency, more functional usage |
| Common forms             | "If you please," "If you think proper"          | More direct forms with material processes  |
| Primary function         | Politeness and relationship building            | Efficiency and practical guidance          |
| Social context           | Emphasis on proper social relations             | Emphasis on practical domestic management  |

# Corpus and Methodology

## CoWITE18

1700-1799

190,486 tokens

5,695 types

~50,000 words per decade

## CoWITE19

1800-1899

522,963 tokens

12,540 types

~50,000 words per decade

## Selection criteria

First editions only

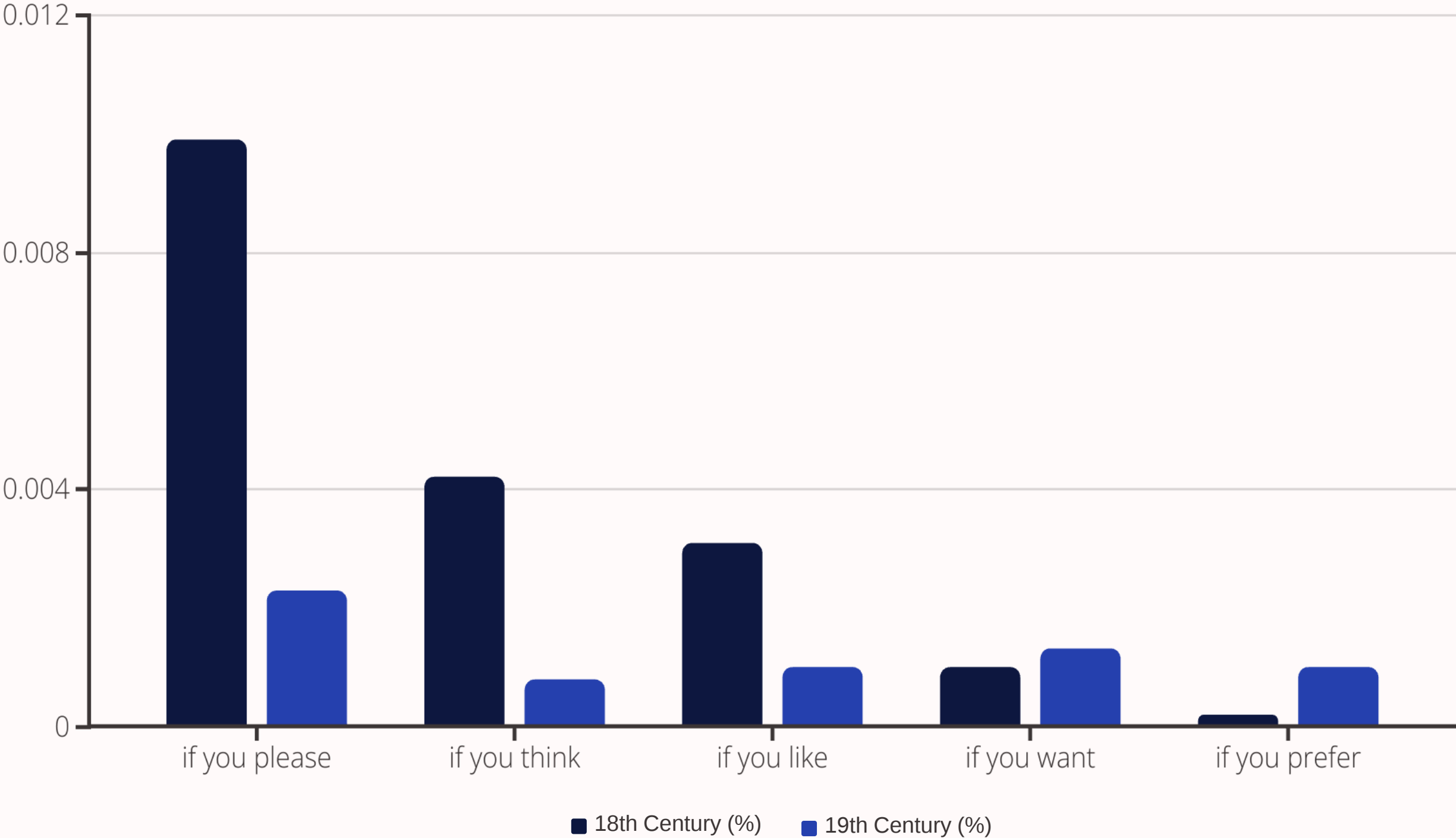
Native English-speaking women

British or American authors

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Using the *CasualConc* corpus tool, we systematically searched for "If you..." constructions across both subcorpora. We calculated raw and normalised frequencies (per 1,000 tokens) and applied chi-square tests to determine statistical significance. Each occurrence was then analysed in context, examining its mitigating role, contribution to tone, and reflection of social expectations.



# Overall frequencies



# Distribution patterns

- The visualisations clearly demonstrate the evolving patterns in women's instructive writing. The 18th-century corpus favours explicit politeness markers, with formulas like "if you please" dominating the discourse. This reflects the social expectations and communicative norms of the period, where deference was often expected in women's writing.
- In contrast, the 19th century introduces new patterns that signal changing social attitudes. The shift toward more pragmatic expressions like "if you want" and "if you prefer" suggests an adaptation to a broader, possibly more diverse readership with different expectations for instructional texts.



# Statistical Significance

32.95

Chi-square value

Measuring pattern distribution across centuries

0.238

P-value

Not significant at standard 0.05 level

28

Degrees of freedom

Based on pattern variations

Despite the observable shifts in individual forms, statistical analysis suggests that the overall variation is not strong enough to reject the null hypothesis of stability.

The chi-square test returned a value of 32.95 with a p-value of 0.238, which exceeds the standard significance threshold of 0.05.

This finding indicates that while the tone and lexical preferences evolved over time, the use of "If you..." as a general discursive strategy remained relatively consistent across both centuries. The changes were more qualitative than quantitative in nature.



## Functional Analysis: 18th century



### **Explicit politeness**

"You may add sugar, if you please, to sweeten the dish."



### **Deference to reader**

"If you think it proper, you may add a little more salt."



### **Domestic context**

"If you like, this receipt may be used for family dinners."



### **Relational tone**

"If you please to try this method, you will find it very satisfactory."

In 18th-century texts, "if you please" often functions as a marker of explicit politeness and deference. These constructions reflect a clear attempt to engage the reader respectfully while maintaining the author's position as knowledge-provider. The language acknowledges the reader's agency while operating within the constraints of period-appropriate gendered discourse.

# Functional analysis: 19th century



The 19th century sees a shift toward more pragmatic, user-centred advice. Forms like "if you want" and "if you find" become more prominent, highlighting reader agency and personal choice. This evolution aligns with broader changes in literacy and public readership, as instructional texts began targeting a more diverse audience, possibly including working-class readers.

# Politeness and deference in the 18th century

## Explicit politeness

Strong preference for constructions like "If you please" that served as clear mitigators to soften directive tones in instructions.

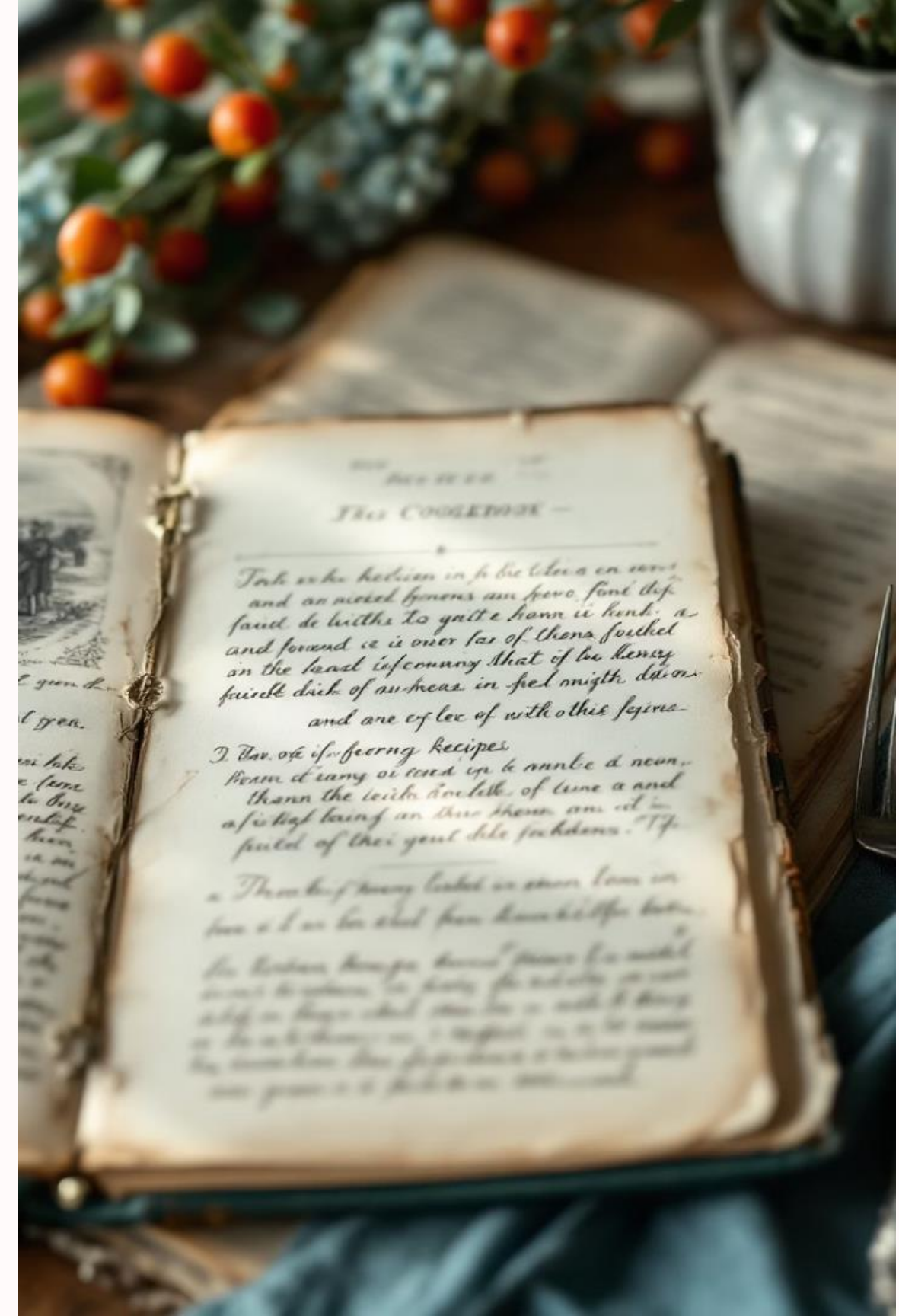
## Maintained authority

Authors balanced guidance with respect, creating a space where suggestion replaced imposition while preserving their instructional authority.

## Cultural alignment

Reflected the period's emphasis on decorum, courtesy, and relational harmony, particularly in women's writing of the time.

These linguistic choices reveal a model of authorship that guided without imposing, aligning with Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of positive politeness while maintaining the social hierarchies of the era.



# 18th century examples

"You may do Barberries or black Rizers the same Way, if you please: If you please to do them with the Stalks, you may take fewer of bruised Currans."

- Johnston, 1740

"Garnish with lemon. You may lard it, **if you think** proper so to do."

- Cole, 1788

"You may add a little vinegar **if you like it.**"

- Frazer, 1791

Take two or three anchovies, wash them well, take out the bones, cut them small, and put them in a stew-pan, with a good gravy seasoned with pepper and salt; you may add a little vinegar **if you like** it, let it be hot and relishing; you may use this sauce with roasted meat



# Functionality and reader autonomy in the 19th century



## Increased literacy

Growing literacy rates and a more diverse reading public



## Urbanization

Changing social structures and communication needs



## Diverse audience

Middle-class and working-class readers entering the market



## Practical approach

Shift toward functionality and reader empowerment

These sociocultural changes drove a shift toward more functional, pragmatic constructions such as "If you find," "If you want," and "If you like." The language evolved to encourage readers to evaluate, and act based on personal judgment rather than deferring to authority.

# 19th century examples

1

## Early 19th century

"If **you want to use** them as ornaments for a dessert, you may gild or colour them to your taste." (Haslehurst, 1814)

2

## Mid-19th century

"It is easy to add, **if you find** them too sour for your taste." (Mrs. Child, 1841)

These examples demonstrate the evolution toward reader empowerment. "If you want" and "if you find" place emphasis on personal preference and judgment, giving the reader flexibility and agency. These strategies still mitigate imposition but do so in a more individualized and adaptable way.



# Continuity and change

## 18th century

Characterized by formality and explicit deference

- Focus on "if you please"
- Emphasis on "if you think proper"
- Interpersonal alignment
- Building rapport and maintaining relational tone

## Continuity

Across both periods:

- "If you..." as a mitigating strategy
- Respectful, reader-oriented discourse
- Avoidance of direct commands
- Offering suggestions and options

## 19th century

Favored more varied, pragmatic expressions

- Rise of "if you want"
- Increase in "if you prefer"
- Functional adaptability
- Clarity and streamlined information flow

# Conclusion



The "If you..." construction functions not only as a pragmatic softener but as a linguistic marker of historical change—capturing how interpersonal dynamics shift with changing norms, audiences, and communicative goals. Language, as this study shows, is never static; it mirrors and mediates the world around it.

These linguistic patterns reveal the evolution from a society structured around politeness and deference to one increasingly valuing autonomy, practicality, and inclusivity—demonstrating how even small grammatical constructions can illuminate broader historical transformations.

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Thanks!



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