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Striving for Reconciliation? An Analysis of Redressive Facework in North American Petitions to the King (1764-75)

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Abstract

This paper analyses the mitigating strategies used in North American petitions to King George III in order to minimize the face threatening potential inherent in the colonists' requests for redress of their grievances. Drawing together models from speech-act, politeness and relational theories, the study aims at establishing the complex facework dynamics deriving from a clash of reality paradigms between the inhabitants of the colonies and the British government. Results reveal an ambiguous attitude on the part of petitioners who, while striving for reconciliation, venture into face attacks which ultimately reveal their contrasting views on the issue of the American dependence on Britain.

Keywords: North American Colonies, Petitions to the King, Reconciliation, Redressive Facework, Social Identities

Introduction

In the twelve years of Imperial Crisis from 1764 to 1776, North American colonists saw their constitutional rights and privileges undermined by Parliamentary Acts which imposed taxation without representation and envisaged both the constitution of jury-less admiralty courts and the presence of British troops in America to enforce compliance with imperial regulations. Although the Sugar Act (1764) and the Stamp Act (1765) – the first two taxes designed to raise revenue for the British – were repealed in 1766 as a result of the widespread protest in the provinces, the American Declaratory Act issued by Parliament in that same year confirmed the British government's right to levy taxes on the colonies, thus irreparably compromising the peaceful relationship between America and Britain. One year later, the Parliament's legislative power was actualized in a series of measures – known as the Townshend Acts (1767-68) – which were passed to tax British goods imported into North America.

The strenuous resistance conducted by the colonies led to rioting and disorder to the point that in 1770, as a result of a peak of tension which erupted in the Boston Massacre, Parliament repealed the Acts with the exception of the tax on tea. Confident in their birthright as English freemen, colonists carried on their protest, lamenting the disparaging treatment received from the mother-land. This aroused the resentment of the British government which retaliated with the passing of the Coercive Acts (1774) intended to punish colonists for their insubordination and to restore order in Massachusetts after the Boston Tea Party (Rakove 1998; Conway 2013).

Throughout these tumultuous years, the British subjects in America never lost their hope to have their constitutional rights acknowledged by the king with respect to Parliament's abuses. It was with this enduring trust in the king's Prerogative that they repeatedly ventured into petitioning George III to obtain redress of their grievances. The explosion of petitions in this period testifies to the strenuous effort of the colonists to find a peaceful resolution that would restore harmony with the parent-state and guarantee the wellbeing of the Empire. While the early petitions – accompanied by episodes of social turmoil – might be seen as partly successful given the repeal of several acts of Parliament (e.g., Sugar Act, Stamp Act, Townshend Acts), those appearing after 1770 did nothing but exacerbate the animosity between the colonies and the central government. Despite the petitioners' professed loyalty to the king and their denial of any desire for independence, their requests were met with indignation and hostility at Court. Not only did the king generally ignore their petitions but even the American agents in London were reluctant to show them to the monarch for fear of harming rather than benefitting the colonies' cause (Kaplan 1972; Shain 2014, 33). It is precisely this mismatch between the reconciliatory intentions of the colonists and the king's hostile reception that constitutes the starting point for my analysis of redressive facework. In particular, my aim is to examine the complex discursive balance that colonists tried hard to achieve between their need to enforce the king's compliance with their requests and their adherence to the high deferential norms required by the petitionary genre and dictated by the power imbalance between participants. Given the clash of reality paradigms between the colonies and the king, petitioners embarked on a tough diplomatic mission which demanded socio-pragmatic skills and good knowledge of petitionary discourse practice.¹

My analysis is based on a dataset of 15 petitions issued between 1764 and 1775 and is carried out by applying socio-pragmatic principles coming from speech act, politeness and relational theories re-adapted to letter-writing as a communicative act (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984; Brown and Levinson 1987; Blum-Kulka and House 1989; Locher 2004; Locher and Watts 2005; Culpeper and Archer 2008; Culpeper 2011). Starting from the assumption that petitions, as a macro request move, entail a face threatening force, my focus is on the language of mitigation deployed in the text and its efficacy in downplaying potential face attacks. Throughout the analysis, I shall move back and forth between the colonists' goals and the king's possible construal/interpretation of their requests, always bearing in mind the tumultuous context of rioting and armed conflicts which accompanied the colonists' supplications. The results of the analysis suggest that colonists were responsible principally for incidental face attacks to the king, which were performed in spite of their offensive consequences, though not necessarily out of spite (Goffman 1967, 14). Even so, the conflicting perspectives between radical and moderate representatives in assemblies and congress complicated the picture, making petitions increasingly ambiguous in terms of the colonists' real goals: were they really striving to achieve

¹ "Reality paradigm" is a concept introduced by Archer in her analysis of facework in courtroom discourse. It is used to refer to "the systems of values and beliefs [...] by reference to which a person or a society comprehends the world" (Fowler 1991, 130 and Archer 2011, 13), in other words it acts as a truth-filter.

reconciliation or did the intransigence of their requests – presented as the *sine qua non* for a peaceful resolution – reveal an unspeakable desire for independence?

1. Dataset

My dataset consists of 15 petitions to the king written by American colonies both as individual and collective bodies from May 1764 to July 1775.² The database amounts to 19,525 words and covers the decade of intense taxation and repressive legislation in America which began with the introduction of the Sugar Act (1764) and the Stamp Act (1765), continued with the Townshend Acts (1767-1768) and peaked with the Coercive Acts (1774). The petitions in my dataset document the main requests moved by the colonies throughout the eleven years prior to the Declaration of Independence (1776) and show the leading role of the provinces of Virginia, New York and Massachusetts in presenting their “remonstrances” to the king. The table below gives the distribution of the 15 petitions in relation to the passing of the Acts.

PETITION TO THE KING	COLONY/IES	YEAR	ACTS OF PARLIAMENT
1	Pennsylvania	1764	Sugar Act
2	Rhode Island	1764	Sugar Act
3	Virginia	1764	Sugar Act
4	New York	1764	Sugar and Currency Acts ³
5	Massachusetts-Bay, Rhode Island, Providence Plantations, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, the Government of the Counties of New-Castle, Ken and Sussex, upon Delaware, Province of Maryland	1765	Stamp Act, Quartering Act ⁴

² There were many Petitions to the king written from 1764 to 1775. The fifteen texts collected are the result of a research of online collections and books and of the *British Newspaper Archive* since petitions were often copied from the London press and reported in British provincial newspapers and magazines (i.e., petition 9 published in *The Scots Magazine*, 1 September 1769, <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000545/17690901/009/0027>> [10/2022]). Petition 1 is available at the *Founders Online Archive* (<<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-11-02-0050>> [10/2022]); petition 2 is available in the *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England* (Bartlett 1861, 414-16); petitions 3, 4, 12 and 15 are contained in *The Declaration of Independence in Historical Context* (Shain 2014, 56-57, 35-42, 239-44 e 290-93); petition 5 is available on the *Evans Early American Imprint Collection* (<<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N08166.0001.001/1:1.18?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>> [10/2022]); petition 6 is reported in *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle* (1770, 169); petition 7 is contained in the *Speeches of the Governors of Massachusetts from 1765 to 1775* (Bradford 1818, 121-23) while petition 8 and 11 can be found on the Colonial Society of Massachusetts website (<<https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/2942>> [10/2022], <<https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/3066>> [10/2022]); petition 10 is available on the *Online Rockefeller Library Collections* (<<https://research.colonialwilliamsburg.org/library/materials/manuscripts/view/index.cfm?id=MiscPMR>> [10/2022]); petition 13 is available on the *Northern Illinois University Digital Collection* (<<https://digital.lib.niu.edu/islandora/object/niu-amarch%3A79026>> [10/2022]); petition 14 is contained in *American Archives: Fourth Series* (1837, 1313-16).

³ With the Currency Act, Parliament assumed control of the colonial currency system. The act prohibited the use of any new bills and the reissue of existing currency.

⁴ The Quartering Act of 1765 required the colonies to house British soldiers in barracks provided by the colonies. The New York colonial assembly refused to comply.

6	Virginia	1766	Stamp Act repealed in March, Declaratory Act
7	Massachusetts-Bay	20 Jan. 1768	Townshend Acts
8	Massachusetts-Bay	7 July 1768	Townshend Acts
9	New York	1768	Townshend Acts, Suspending Act ⁵
10	Virginia	1769	
11	Massachusetts-Bay	1769	Townshend Acts repealed in 1770 except for the tax on tea
12	Grand American Continental Congress	1774	Coercive Acts
13	Jamaica	1774	Coercive Acts
14	New York	1775	Coercive Acts
15	Second Continental Congress (Olive Branch Petition)	1775	Coercive Acts

Table 1 – Distribution of petitions to the king in my database in relation to the passing of Acts of Parliament

2. Theoretical background and methodology

On account of the American petitioners' commitment to obtain redress for the preservation of peace, my analysis takes Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) as point of departure. The two scholars base their view of politeness on Goffman's notion of face (1967), which is the public and institutional self-image that both interlocutors have and wish to maintain in interaction. They also suggest that face manifests itself in two dualistic wants: a positive face, which corresponds to "the desire to be ratified, understood, approved of, liked or admired" (Brown and Levinson 1987, 62) and a negative face, which is "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his [*sic*] actions be unimpeded by others" (*ibidem*). Brown and Levinson assume that both S (= speaker) and H (= hearer) have an interest in maintaining the interlocutor's face even when they commit face threatening acts (FTAs). Requests – which are the major speech act in the petitions to the king – fall within the category of FTA and as such they lend themselves to an analysis in terms of redressive facework activated by the colonists to mitigate the threat. Within their politeness framework, Brown and Levinson assess the weight of the FTAs and the resulting amount of redressive facework required on the basis of three major sociolinguistic variables: the social distance between participants (D), the relative power of H over S (P) and the absolute ranking of the imposition in the cultural context (R) (74).

⁵ The Suspending Act prohibited the New York Assembly from conducting any business until the colony complied with the financial requirements of the Quartering Act for the expense of the British troops stationed there.

In order to achieve a better understanding of the complex relational dynamics in petitioning the king, however, Brown and Levinson's model needs to be integrated with considerations on the context of discourse where participants assume, construct and negotiate their status and power in interaction. In this regard, the concept of relational work elaborated by Locher (2004) and Locher and Watts (2005) – with its emphasis on interpersonal relationships as dynamic constructs that emerge in situated contexts, relative to situated norms – is particularly useful since it allows us to account for forms of resistance to or deviations from the expected protocol. Watts's definition of power as a discursive construct is particularly relevant in this sense:

An individual *A* possesses power if s/he has the freedom of action to achieve the goals s/he has set her/himself, regardless of whether or not this involves the potential to impose *A*'s will on others to carry out actions that are in *A*'s interests. (Watts 1991, 60)

A speaker/writer can discursively construct his/her freedom of action (also called “power to”) by requesting/expecting the interlocutor to do something and the interlocutor, in his/her turn, can contest and resist the speaker/writer's constructed “power to”, especially, though not necessarily, if the interlocutor is the higher status participant. In such cases, as Locher argues (2004, 59), the use of politeness strategies on the part of the speaker/writer stems from a double desire: 1) to protect his/her own and the interlocutor's face and 2) to construct an identity that allows for a (temporary) exercise of power without endangering the social fabric. As we will see in the course of the analysis, colonists fail, despite their highly deferential language and conflict-mitigating strategies, to obtain the king's recognition of their “power to” and – consequently – to exercise “power over” him by influencing his decision.

In order to account for the mitigating strategies deployed by the colonists in their pleading, I borrow and re-adapt Archer's definition of request as a speech act in which “S wants [and expects] Z [= an action/event] to happen and hopes to get A to do it” (2006, 189) The speaker/writer can minimize the face-threat, for example, by activating choice on the scale of indirectness or by using a variety of mitigating devices to manipulate the degree of imposition. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984, 204) draw a distinction between internal manipulation, which concerns the “head act” of the request (i.e., the minimal unit which can realise a request), and external manipulation which pertains to the context in which the sentence used for realizing the act is embedded. Regarding internal manipulation, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (201-02) identify nine (in)directness strategy types for the actualization of the head act, which are grouped as follows:⁶

Direct (impositives), i.e., the most direct, explicit level, realized by requests syntactically marked as such:

1. Mood derivable (i.e., the grammatical mood of the verb in the utterance marks its illocutionary force as request: “Move your car”)
2. Performatives (i.e., the illocutionary force of the utterance is explicitly named by the speaker: “I'm asking you to move the car”)
3. Hedged performatives (i.e., utterances embedding the naming of the illocutionary force: “I would like to ask you to move your car”)

⁶The term “direct” in Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's work does not have the sense that Searle (1975) intended for it. “Directness” seems to refer to the explicitness with which the illocutionary point is signaled by the utterance and complex processes of conventionalization or standardization contribute to the explicitness (Culpeper and Archer 2008, 56).

4. Obligation statements (i.e., the illocutionary point is directly derivable from the semantic meaning of the locution: “Madam, you’ll have to move your car”)
5. Want statements (i.e., the utterance expresses the speaker’s intentions, desire or feeling *vis à vis* the fact that the hearer do X: “I want you to move your car”).

Conventionally indirect, i.e., procedures that realize the act by reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance:

6. Suggestory formulae (i.e., the sentence contains a suggestion to X: “How about moving your car”)
7. Query preparatory (i.e., utterance contains reference to preparatory conditions – e.g., ability or willingness, the possibility of the act being performed – as conventionalized in any specific language: “Would you mind moving your car?”)

Non-conventionally indirect, i.e., the open-ended group of indirect strategies that realize the request:

8. Strong hints (i.e., utterance contains partial reference to objects or to elements needed for the implementation of the act, directly pragmatically implying the act: “You have left the kitchen in a right mess”)
9. Mild hints (i.e., utterances that make no reference to the request proper, or any of its elements, but are interpretable through the context as requests, indirectly pragmatically implying the act: “We don’t want any crowding” as a request to move the car).

This taxonomy has been applied both to real and fictional dialogues/conversations (Blum-Kulka 1987; Culpeper and Archer 2008), but it can also prove useful for an investigation of requests framed in letters as a form of offline mediated social interaction. Although the problem of applying Blum-Kulka’s contemporary classification of request strategies to historical data remains (see Jucker and Taavitasainen 2000, 69-70), I follow Culpeper and Archer’s claim that the function of requests is relatively stable in time, given their central “transactional” illocutionary force which makes them less sensitive to cultural variation in comparison with other speech acts with a central expressive or socio-psychological illocutionary force (Kohnen 2002; Culpeper and Archer 2008, 57).

Equally relevant to the analysis of requests in petitions to the king are the strategies related to external modification. They fall within two categories: alerters, i.e., elements which precede the request and whose function is to alert the hearer’s attention to the ensuing act (e.g., title, first name, attention getters) and support moves, i.e., supporting statements which are used to persuade someone to do something. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain identify six types of mitigating supportive moves: checking on availability, getting a precommitment, grounder, disarmer, sweetener and imposition minimizer (1984, 204-05). As we will see in the course of the analysis, colonists rely on both internal and external modifications to frame their request in accordance with the discursive practice of the petition genre and the social structures that it enacts.

When possible, my qualitative analysis of requests will be supported by the use of corpus linguistics tools, in line with the principles of corpus-assisted discourse studies (Stubbs 2001; Partington 2004). More precisely, the occurrences of the types of acts and moves are checked manually on account of the difficulty of identifying pragmatic and argumentative features through concordancing software, whereas the frequency of single words and their

occurrence in concordances are retrieved through the use of the software *WordSmith Tools* (8.0) by Mike Scott (2020).

3. *Petitions*

The humble petition provided the most acceptable way to reach national government, and especially the king, in the attempt to avoid insurrection or other overt forms of dissent (Fraser 1961). However, it was not until 1689, when the Bill of Rights acknowledged petitioning the monarch as the birthright of Britons, that the discourse practice reached its full legitimacy. Historians of Britain and its Empire have devoted considerable attention to petitionary practices from the Middle Ages to the Modern period providing interesting studies on the standardization of the genre as reflective of a monarchical order (e.g., Foster 1974; Hart 1991; Zaret 2000; Dodd 2007; Muller 2017; Huzzey and Miller 2020). As Zaret (2000) and Muller (2017) point out in the early and late modern period, petitions were permitted mechanisms for “remonstrance” precisely because they were worded in a language of deference, humility and supplication which reiterated the bond between monarch and subject, featuring the former as “the locus of loyalty and the fount of justice” (Muller 2017, 684). In this sense, the choice of petitioning the king is a choice of diplomacy which reveals the desire for a peaceful resolution within the framework of the socio-political and cultural fabric of the Empire. With respect to this, Muller has recently conducted a comparative analysis of four petitions to the king produced in the British colonies of Quebec and Granada between 1764 and 1766 which display a series of genre conventions which are also present in the American colonists’ petitions to the king:

1. After the opening address, petitioners identify themselves as devoted subjects whose enduring loyalty entitles them to seek redress from the monarch.
2. Colonists underline their allegiance to the king and the mother-land and in several occasions call attention to the pivotal role they played in the successful economic growth of Great Britain, thus combining loyalty with utility.
3. Petitioners detail their grievances, referring to their rights as they understood them and request intervention from the king. Throughout these passages petitioners continue to use deferential language and expressions of loyalty to the king, the country and the Constitution.
4. Petitioners conclude by recapitulating requests and reiterating their humble submission to the monarch, through which they secured their pleading right.

Although the American colonists generally adhere to the petition practice, the analysis of their facework dynamics shows an increasing tendency to slip into incidental face threatening deviations from it. In particular, the restriction according to which grievance in petitions was not to criticize specific laws nor to imply popular discontent with government (Zaret 2000, 97) is often neglected on account of the gravity of the colonists’ unconstitutional treatment. In this way, American colonists manage to carve an area of “deferential resistance” which turns an expected apolitical conveyance of information into a manifestation of “deferential dissent” towards the British government, for which redress is desperately asked and strongly expected.

4. Analysis

As previously stated, my study focuses on the discursive construction of requests in terms of “head act”, which realizes the speech act, and support moves, which constitute the argumentative backbone of the petition.⁷ Given the colonists’ need to have their constitutional rights acknowledged, special attention is given to the increasing disjunction which exists between the adherence to genre conventions and local deviations from it, the latter being determined by 1) the relationship between the colony/ies and Britain at a particular point in time, 2) the king’s repeated neglect, and 3) the increasing social, commercial and military turmoil which accompanied the colonists’ petitions and which is thoroughly documented in the American press (Cecconi 2021). The table below reports the summarising frequencies for each type of head act and support move:

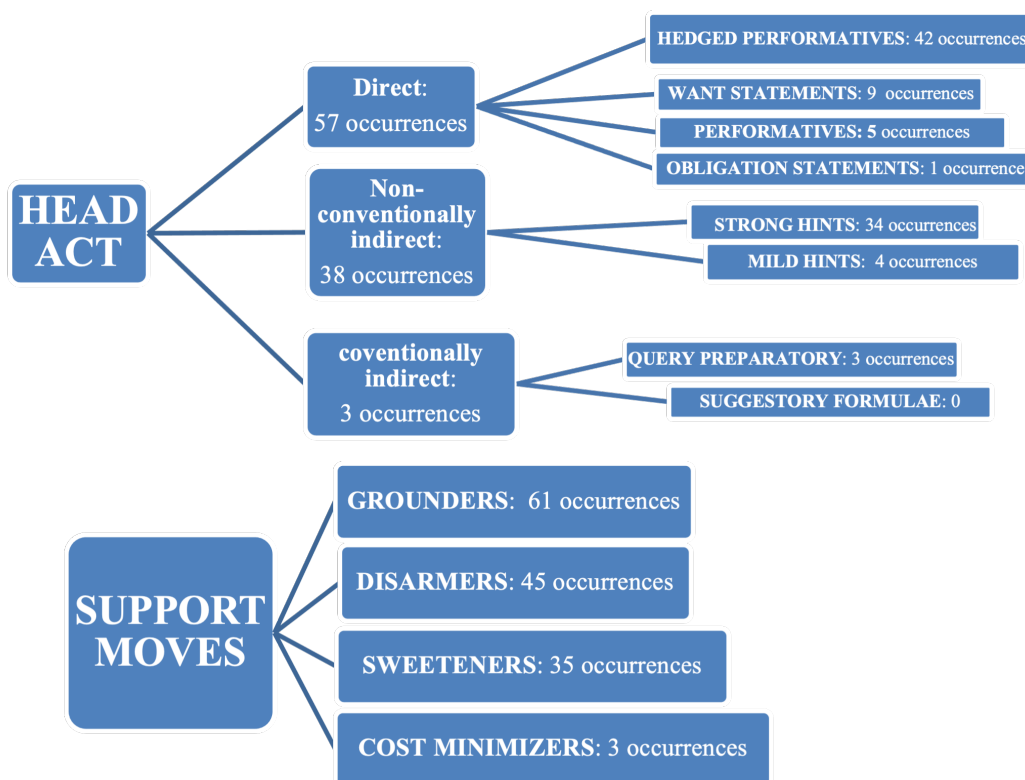


Table 2 – Frequency of each type of head act and support move in my dataset (elaborated by the author)

⁷The third unit of a request is the alerter. Alerters are used to enhance the interlocutor’s involvement in the subject matter (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984). Given the off-line character of petitions and their conventional norms, alerters restrict themselves to the use of the address term “Most gracious sovereign” and for this reason I have not included them in the analysis. Their role is nonetheless important to involve the king in the colonists’ cause.

4.1 Head act

Most of the requests in my database are actualized in the form of hedged performatives (42 occurrences) where the requestive force of the move is semantically mitigated through the choice of the performative verb. The most frequent verbs are *beseech/ing* (12 occurrences), *implore/ing* (11 occurrences), *praying* (11 occurrences) and *elintreat* (8 occurrences) which adhere to the script of the inferior supplicating the superior in order to obtain redress (Fraser 1961).⁸ Two colonies in my data – Virginia and New York – adopt the figurative formulae: *prostrate at the foot of your Throne* and *throw at your feet* which enhance their role of humble supplicant in the attempt to counterbalance the face-threatening potential of their request:

- (1) We therefore [...] impressed with the highest sense of duty and affection, *prostrate ourselves at the feet of your Throne*, most humble beseeching and imploring your Majesty, graciously to interpose your royal influence and authority. (Virginia 1766, my emphasis)
- (2) THEY, therefore, *prostrating themselves at the Foot of your Throne*, most humbly implore your Fatherly Goodness and Protection of this and all their Sister Colonies. (Virginia 1769, my emphasis)
- (3) we are emboldened to *throw ourselves at your Majesty's Feet*, humble Petitioners, in behalf of the loyal Colony which we represent. (New York, 1775, my emphasis)

This highly deferential figurative language continues to be used until the very last petitions in 1775, showing how the majority of representatives were still anxious to reassure the king about their loyalty, in the hope “to achieve a just reconciliation through a newly empowered monarchy and an entrenched imperial constitution based on long-established British norms, laws, practices, and constitutional rights” (Shain 2014, 18).

The second most frequent head act is realized in the form of strong hint which pertains to the category of non-conventional indirect request. According to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's definition, “strong hints” contain “partial reference to object or elements needed for the implementation of the act (directly pragmatically implying the act)” (1984, 202). There are 34 strong hints in my data which in 14 cases are anticipated by the polite formulae “beg leave” and “permit us” + reference to the colonists' grievances.

- (4) *Permit us* therefore, most gracious Sovereign to approach your imperial throne with the greatest concern at certain laws lately enacted by the parliament of G. Britain, manifestly tending to divert your Majesty's subjects of this colony of this, the most inestimable of all the blessings they have long and uninterruptedly enjoyed and which they have reason to hope would have been secured and perpetuated to the remotest period of time (New York, 1768, my emphasis)

⁸ 7 out of the 11 occurrences of pray/ing introduce requests, in the other cases, the word is used in the sense of praying God.

- (5) It is with the deepest concern that your humble suppliants *would represent to your Majesty, that your Parliament*, the rectitude of whose intention is never to be questioned, *thought proper to pass divers Acts imposing taxes on your Majesty's subjects in America, with the sole and express purpose of raising a revenue.* (Massachusetts, 20 Jan. 1768, my emphasis)

While laying grievances (in the attempt to obtain redress) constitutes the essence of petitions, the colonists' apportionment of blame to Parliament strikes a dissonant note which in the following years escalates into an overt rejection of parliamentary sovereignty. In 1768, the New York and the Massachusetts colonies are careful to mitigate the accusation through impersonalization (ex 4: *concern at certain laws lately enacted by the Parliament of G. Britain*) and deference (ex 5: *the rectitude of whose intention is never to be questioned*). Nevertheless, their strong hints imply a criticism of the British government which risks impinging on the institutional face of the monarch. This is particularly the case in example 4, where the colonists' reference to their expectation that their constitutional rights would be preserved (*they have reason to hope*) inevitably restricts the king's freedom of action. On several other occasions, petitioners venture into expressing "hopes" that suggest contempt of authority and partly divert from the protocol of neutral conveyance of information:

- (6) Your Majesty's dutiful Subjects of Virginia *most humbly and unanimously hope* that this invaluable Birthright descended to them from their Ancestors and in which they have been protected by your Royal Predecessors will not be suffered to receive an Injury (Virginia, 1764, my emphasis)
- (7) *May we not therefore humbly hope*, for your Majesty's royal Approbation of our Unwillingness to part with a Right, which the Authority of the Prince, in the Infancy of this Colony, thought proper to put into its Hands [...]? (New York, 1764, my emphasis)
- (8) the inhabitants of this country entertained *the most solid hopes* that they were not only intitled to, but had gained, by uninterrupted usage, by the concession of the crown and the British parliament such a civil constitution as would remain secure and permanent and be transmitted inviolate to their latest posterity. (New York, 1768, my emphasis)

Interestingly, as we approach the last years of peace negotiation, the two Congressional petitions (October 1774, July 1775) and the New York petition (March 1775) reveal the deployment of want statements (9 occurrences) through the verbs "wish" and "desire" and the corresponding nouns. In the 18th century, want statements can still be considered as polite indirect request rather than impositives, although speakers/writers express their wishes directly/explicitly (Kohnen 2002; Culpeper and Archer 2008). Concordances show that want statements function more as face saving than face threatening acts. Indeed, they are used to present the colonists' desire for harmony as supposedly consistent with that of the king. In this way, American petitioners attempt to exercise power over George III but indirectly, via influence, that is to say by inducing the monarch to have the desire they want him to have. They do so by assuming/constructing an allegedly shared interest in unity and peace for whose maintenance the king has necessarily to comply with their request:

- (9) *We wish not* a diminution of the prerogative, nor do we solicit the grant of any new right in our favour. Your royal authority over us and our connection with Great-Britain, we shall always carefully and zealously endeavour to support [...]. (Grand American Continental Congress, 1774, my emphasis)⁹
- (10) We lament it as one of the greatest Misfortunes, that the happy and peaceful Harmony, which has hitherto subsisted between us, should now by any Means be interrupted: and 'tis the earnest and *first Wish* of our Hearts, that it may be speedily restored. (New York, 1775, my emphasis)
- (11) we not only *most ardently desire* the former harmony between her and these colonies may be restored, but that a concord may be established between them upon so firm a basis as to perpetuate its blessings, uninterrupted by any future dissentions. (Second Continental Congress, 1775, my emphasis)

4.2 Support move: grounders

Grounders allow petitioners to legitimize their request by providing a detailed explanation of the reasons why the request is being advanced in the first place. In this sense, they are used as mitigating strategies which show consideration towards the addressee's negative face. For American colonists who petition the king from the other side of the Atlantic, however, grounders can easily turn into a double-edged weapon. While from the petitioners' perspective grounders are necessary to justify their requests, from the point of view of the king, the reiterated appeals to constitutional rights and long-established norms may sound damaging to his desire to be free from imposition. Nevertheless, American colonists make an extensive use of grounders and articulate them through three main discourse strategies: 1) narration of the colony foundation; 2) explanation of the current difficult situation; 3) justification of the request as consistent with the colonists' duty to the king for the wellbeing of the Empire.

Most of the petitions begin by recounting the origin of the colony with a focus on the "terms and conditions" upon which the British ancestors settled in a distant country and contributed to the expansion of the Empire. The narration of the past is characterized by the pervasive reference to the British identity of the American colonists and to the legal agreement upon which the colonies were founded. This enables petitioners to self-ascribe a "power to" as British subjects for making their requests and for expecting to have them satisfied:

- (12) That this part of America was first planted by adventurers who left England, their native country, by permission of Your Majesty's royal predecessors; and at their own expense, transported themselves to America, with great hardship and difficulty, settled among savages, and formed new colonies in the wilderness. Before their departure, the terms they removed upon, and the relation they should stand in to the mother country, in their emigrant state,

⁹In that some month (October 1774), in its *Address to the People of Great Britain* (21 October 1774), Congress raised concerns regarding the king's prerogative, a concern which was repeated in the Congress's rejection of Parliament's Peace Overtures in July 1775. This seems to testify to the confusion among the colonists of the fundamentals of their own position in this delicate phase of peace negotiations (Shain 2014, 320).

was settled. They were to remain subject to the King, and dependent on the kingdom of England, in return they were to receive protection and enjoy all the privileges of free born Englishmen. (Rhode Island, 1764)

The early petitions against the Sugar Act present the allegiance between colonists and the mother-land as deriving from concession, promise or permission of the Royal authority. The perspective is conservative and reminiscent of pre-Civil War England when the Royal persona of the king was considered as the sole origin of authority and power:

- (13) [...] a Right which as Men and Descendants of Britons they have ever quietly possessed since first *by Royal Permission* and Encouragement they left the Mother Kingdom to extend its Commerce and Dominion (Virginia, 1764, my emphasis)

In that same period, however, the colonies of New York and Massachusetts initiate a legalistic turn in discourse which marks a shift of emphasis from Royal concessions to the legally binding power of the Constitution. This legalistic drift constructs/reflects a conflict of values and beliefs between the British Government, which defends its full power of legislation over the internal affairs of the colonies, and the colonies, which resist it by appealing to the legal power of the Constitution. This ideological mismatch will ultimately hamper any peaceful resolution between the two parties:¹⁰

- (14) That hence soon after the first Planting of this Colony, as in Year 1683, a political Frame was erected [...]; of which the *constituent Parts* were a *Governor and a Council*, in the *Royal Appointment*, and a *Representative of the People* by their own *free Election*. That in these three Branches was lodged the *legislative Authority* of the Colony and particularly the *Power* of taxing its inhabitants for the Support of the Government. And in the uninterrupted Enjoyment of *this Constitution* has your Majesty's Colony of New York continued, from that Period down to the present Day. (New York, 1764, my emphasis)
- (15) Our Connection with this Empire [...], with most humble Submission to your Majesty, we apprehend will be most effectually Accomplished, by [...] securing the inherent Rights and Liberties of your Subjects here, upon the *Principles of the English Constitution*. To this *Constitution* these Two *Principles* are essential, *the Right of your faithful Subjects, freely to grant to your Majesty, such Aids as are required for the Support of your Government over them, and other Public Exigencies, and Trials by their Peers*: By the One they are secured from unreasonable Impositions; and by the Other from Arbitrary Decisions of *the executive Power*. (Massachusetts-Bay, Rhode Island, Providence Plantations, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, the Government of the Counties of New-Castle, Ken and Sussex, upon Delaware, Province of Maryland, 1765, my emphasis)

¹⁰ The references to the Royal concessions in the early petitions reveal another crucial issue at the basis of the conflict between the colonists and Parliament: whether the colonies were dominions of the Crown or of the king. If they were Crown territories, then they had to be absorbed into the British nation and Parliament, as the supreme sovereign body, had legislative power over them. If they were personal holdings of the king, then they were located outside the British dominions and as such, they would have been free from parliamentary control. In their narration of the colony foundation, petitioners hint at the colonies as part of the king's personal holdings which can be governed without parliamentary involvement (Shain 2014, 14).

This same legal rhetoric characterizes the last petitions in a crescendo of face aggravation:

- (16) we beg leave to place it in the royal mind *as the first established principle of the Constitution, that the people of England have a right to partake, and do partake, of the legislation of their country, and that no laws can affect them but such as receive their assent, given by themselves or their Representatives; and it follows, therefore, that no one part of your Majesty's English subjects, either can or ever could legislate for any other part* [...] (Jamaica, 1774, my emphasis)

The next grounder consists in the explanation of the state of emergency of the colony which is structured in a list of grievances that given their quantity and gravity compel the colonists to petition. As previously mentioned, the representation of the state of emergency is accompanied by forms of blame apportionment featuring the British Parliament as main target. While the mitigating strategy of impersonalization/abstraction (*several acts of parliament; system of statutes and regulations; this and many others of the Acts of trade*) is generally maintained throughout the eleven years (42 occurrences), from 1774 colonists venture into a more direct accusation of “men/individuals” in Parliament. The use of descriptors is aggravated by strongly negative evaluation, as we can see in the following examples. The dismantling of the institutional authority of king-in-Parliament and the constructed polarization between the two body politics represents one of the major failures in the colonists' reconciliatory attempts:

- (17) By *several acts of parliament* made in the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth years of your majesty's reign, duties are imposed on us, for the purpose of raising a revenue, and the powers of admiralty and vice-admiralty courts are extended beyond their ancient limits, whereby our property is taken from us without our consent [...] *those designing and dangerous men, who daringly interposing themselves between your royal person and your faithful subjects, and for several years past incessantly employed to dissolve the bonds of society, by abusing your majesty's authority, misrepresenting your American subjects, and prosecuting the most desperate and irritating projects of oppression, have at length compeled us, by the force of accumulated injuries, too severe to be any longer tolerable, to disturb your majesty's repose by our complaints.* (Grand American Continental Congress, 1774, my emphasis)
- (18) they were alarmed by *a new system of statutes and regulations* adopted for the administration of the colonies, that filled their minds with the most painful fears and jealousies; [...] We shall decline the ungrateful task of describing the irksome variety of artifices, practised by *many of your Majesty's Ministers, the delusive pretences, fruitless terrors, and unavailing severities, that have, from time to time, been dealt out by them, in their attempts to execute this impolitic plan, or of tracing, thro' a series of years past, the progress of the unhappy differences between Great Britain and these colonies, which have flowed from this fatal source.* (Second Continental Congress, 1775)

Both examples (17) and (18) show the coexistence of indirect strategies (*acts of parliament; a new system of statutes and regulations*) and direct strategies of blame apportionment (*those designing and dangerous men; artifices practised by many of your Majesty's Ministers*) within the same petition. This ambivalent discourse behaviour is typical of the two congressional petitions and documents the lack of unity among the colonies' representatives. As a matter of fact, two distinct political approaches to conflict were present in Congress in 1774 and 1775 (Kenyon 1968). On one side were radicals who moved more quickly than others away from

their loyal adherence to the king and the inclusion in the British Empire. On the other side were moderates – mostly representatives of the mid-Atlantic colonies – who were reluctant to separate themselves from the Crown and were more interested in achieving a constitutional reconciliation with Great Britain (Shain 2014, 10). These conflicting positions are mirrored in an ambiguous discourse behaviour which positions itself in a fuzzy area between Goffman's incidental, accidental and intentional categories of face attacks (1967).¹¹ Archer calls this fuzzy area “*indeterminate-as-to-speaker-intent zone*” (2011, 6; cfr. Archer 2008) in order to capture the ambiguity deriving from the speaker's multiple goals in communication and the consequential increasing processing effort of the receiver. Since it is unlikely that the primary aim of the colonists as a whole was to cause offence to the king, it is plausible to place their moves as closer to the incidental and/or accidental face threat. In this “*indeterminate zone*”, face aggravation does not seem to be primarily motivated by an intent to harm, but is nonetheless performed more or less consciously by the colonists as subsidiary to their major aim, which is to convince/enforce the king to cooperation even at the cost of damaging his face within and outside the Empire.¹²

Since, as we have already said, the supreme exercise of power consists in making others have the desire you want them to have (Lukes 1974, 23), colonists justify their requests by shifting emphasis from their own interests to Great Britain's economic advantages in peaceful compliance. By maximizing the commercial benefits to Great Britain and the cost born by the colonies throughout the years, petitioners hint at the incredible damage and danger that the mother-land would incur if the colonies did not inform her about the unconstitutional practices imposed by Parliament. The message again impinges on the king's freedom of action showing, although indirectly, that it is in Britain's best interests to change policy if she wants to keep on prospering in the Atlantic route and maintaining her profitable Empire. In this way, the grounder takes on the face aggravating connotations of a warning which amounts practically to indirect blackmail:

- (19) By this Protection she will for ever secure to herself the Advantage of conveying to all Europe, the Merchandises which America furnishes, and of Supplying through the same Channel, whatever is wanted from thence. Here opens a boundless Source of Wealth and Naval Strength; yet these immense Advantages, by the Abridgment of those invaluable Rights and Liberties, by which our Growth has been Nourished, are in Danger of being for ever Lost (Massachusetts-Bay, Rhode Island, Providence Plantations, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, the Government of the Counties of New-Castle, Ken and Sussex, upon Delaware, Province of Maryland, 1765)

¹¹ Goffman identifies three categories of face attack. The intentional face attack occurs when the offending person may appear to have acted maliciously and spitefully, with the intention of causing open insult. The incidental face attack, on the other hand, arises as “an unplanned but sometimes anticipated by-product of action”. In this sense, it refers to an action that the speaker performs in spite of its offensive consequences, though not out of spite. Finally, the accidental face threat covers those cases in which the offending person “may appear to have acted innocently; his [*sic*] offence seems to be unintended and unwitting” (1967, 14).

¹² It is worth bearing in mind that petitions quickly moved from the private to the public sphere by their prompt publication in the press. The First Continental Congress Petition, for example, was written on 25 October 1774 and it was made public some months later in January 1775. *The Pennsylvania Evening Post* was among the first newspapers to print it on 24 January 1775. The Olive Branch Petition (the second petition of the Continental Congress) issued on 5 July 1775 appeared in the American newspaper *The New England Chronicle or the Essex Gazette* on 24 August 1775.

- (20) That if it be considered what difficulties the Colonies encountered on their first Settlement; their having defended themselves (a few of them excepted) without any expence to Great Britain: the assistances given by them in the late War, whereby the Empire of Britain is so greatly extended, and its Trade proportionally increased; the diminution of the Value of their Estates, and the Emigration of their Inhabitants occasioned by that extention [...], we humbly conceive it must appear that your Majesty's Subjects in the Colonies have been, and are as much burthened as those in Great Britain; and that they are whilst in America, more advantagious to Britain; than if they were transplanted thither and Subjected to all the duties and taxes paid there. (Massachusetts Bay, 7 July 1768)

The third type of grounder consists in justifying the request as an act of duty to the king. This reiterated formula is aimed at establishing a sense of shared interest in the wellbeing and preservation of the Empire:

- (21) We therefore judging it at all times an *indisputable duty we owe to your Majesty, to our Country, Ourselves and Posterity*, humbly to lay our Grievances before the common Father of all his people (Virginia, 1766, my emphasis)
- (22) Feeling as men, and thinking as subjects, in the manner we do, silence would be disloyalty. *By giving this faithful information we do all in our power to promote the great objects of your royal cares, the tranquillity of your government and the welfare of your people* (Grand American Continental Congress, 1774, my emphasis)
- (23) *we think ourselves required by indispensable obligations to Almighty God, to your Majesty, to our fellow subjects, and to ourselves*, immediately to use all the means in our power, not incompatible with our safety, for stopping the further effusion of blood, and for averting the impending calamities that threaten the British Empire. (Second Continental Congress, 1775, my emphasis)

Interestingly, in the Second Congressional petition, commonly known as the Olive Branch Petition (ex 23), colonists deviate from the cluster “our duty to your Majesty” by interposing God as the supreme authority to which they submit and on whose behalf they feel compelled to move their request. Prioritizing God over the king is a controversial choice which may be interpreted as a sign of the colonists’ attempt to carve a space of independence from the Royal authority which allows them, in the future, to legitimize their secession and self-government in the name of the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God”, as stated in their Declaration of Independence (1776).

4.3 Support move: disarmers

Much of the language of moderation and reconciliation in American petitions centres around the use of disarmers and sweeteners (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984, 205). Disarmers are used by speakers/writers to indicate their awareness of a potential offence to the addressee thereby attempting to anticipate possible refusal. In American petitions they are predicated upon the identity construction of the colonists and are actualized in the text through four discourse strategies: 1) self-presentation as “loyal subjects”; 2) reiteration of the performative

verb *assure* and the corresponding noun (*assurance*); 3) denial of any fault deriving from others' misrepresentation and 4) apologies for deviation from deferential language protocol.

Forms of self-presentation are conventionally found in the opening of petitions and are usually characterized by overlexicalization, which consists in an excess of repetitious and quasi-synonymous terms woven in the fabric of discourse in order to represent an entity or an identity which is problematic or controversial in the social context (Fowler 1991; Teo 2000, 20; Cecconi 2020). In the attempt to reassure the king about their intention to maintain their bond of loyalty to Britain, American petitioners present themselves as “your Majesty’s subjects” (48 occurrences), “your faithful/loyal/dutiful subjects” (26 occurrences), “inhabitants of this/these/those colonies” (11 occurrences), “your (most) dutiful and loyal subjects” (7 occurrences), “your Majesty’s dutiful/your faithful/still faithful/loyal/affectionate colonists” (7 occurrences). The following quotation features an example of self-representation through overlexicalization which enhances the colonists’ warm affection and submission to the monarch and his government:

(24) *the Inhabitants of these Colonies, Unanimously devoted with the warmest Sentiments of Duty and Affection to your Majesty’s Sacred Person and Government, Inviolably attached to the present Happy Establishment of the Protestant Succession in your Illustrious House, and deeply sensible of your Royal Attention to their Prosperity and Happiness, humbly beg Leave to approach the Throne (Massachusetts-Bay, Rhode Island, Providence Plantations, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, the Government of the Counties of New-Castle, Ken and Sussex, upon Delaware, Province of Maryland, 1765, my emphasis)*

The time adverb “still” becomes a frequent collocate in the colonists’ identity construction in the 1770s, when petitioners aim to underline that despite the abuses suffered in the last years, they continue to retain the same feelings of devotion and submission to their king:

(25) *We acknowledge with the warmest Gratitude, the Favor and Protection of our Mother Country; which flowing from Policy, dictated by Wisdom and Humanity, hath enabled us to become so important a Part of the British Empire [...] we still retain the Duty and Affection of Children [...] we love and reverence our venerable parent. (New York, 1775, my emphasis)*

The self-presentation of the petitioners as *loyal subjects* is combined with a set of speech acts which intend to reassure the king about their reconciliatory intentions. The performative verb *assure* is one of the most frequent lexical verbs in my data (19 occurrences). Its use is functional not only as confirmation of the subjects’ happy dependence on the mother-land (ex 26) but also as counterbalance to potential face aggravation deriving from the ensuing requests (in the form of strong hints) (ex 27) and from alarming words which may either predict a negative outcome (ex 28) or strongly impinge on the king’s freedom of action (ex 29).

(26) *And they do assure your Majesty with that Truth and Sincerity, which Duty, Gratitude and Affection to the best of Kings ought ever to inspire, that they will, at all Times, exert their best Endeavours, even at the Expence of their Lives and Fortunes, to promote the Glory of your Majesty’s Reign, and the Prosperity of Great-Britain; upon which, they are convinced, their own Security and Happiness does essentially depend. (Virginia, 1769, my emphasis)*

- (27) With great sincerity *permit us to assure your Majesty*, that your subjects of this Province ever have and will continue to acknowledge your Majesty's High Court of Parliament, as the supreme legislative power of the whole empire, the superintending authority of which is clearly admitted in all cases that can consist with the fundamental rights of nature and the constitution, *to which your Majesty's happy subjects in all parts of your empire conceive they have a just and equitable claim* (Massachusetts, 20 Jan. 1768, my emphasis)
- (28) Your Majesty's most humble petitioners *beg leave to assure* your Majesty that their constituents are so far from affecting *and independency* on their mother-country, the prosperity of which they are ever disposed to the utmost of their power to promote (New York, 1768, my emphasis)
- (29) and *we beg leave to assure* your Majesty, that *we are convinced this will be the only effectual Method* of quieting the Minds of your Majesty's faithful American Subjects and of restoring that Harmony and cordial Union between the Mother Country and us, which is so essential to the Welfare and Prosperity of both. (New York, 1775, my emphasis)

The third actualization of disarmers concerns the colonists' denial of any revolutionary intent attributed to them by others' misrepresentation. As Martin and White (2005, 119) show in their appraisal theory, denials are dialogic devices which invoke and respond to claims/beliefs that the speaker/writer challenges as misconceptions. In American petitions, the denial is indirectly against the king and more specifically against beliefs which colonists assume that some members of Parliament are subject to. Disarmers in the form of denial of others' accusation accumulate in the last petitions. This is quite predictable given that the colonists' pressing petitioning, the surge of rioting and the inflaming propaganda of Patriots (Cecconi 2021) must have upset many MPs who saw their parliamentary sovereignty overtly challenged by what they considered to be second-rate subjects (Dickinson 2010):

- (30) [...] had they [unhappy differences] proceeded on our part from a restless levity of temper, unjust impulses of ambition, or a [...]ful suggestions of seditious persons, we should merit the opprobrious terms frequently bestowed on us by those we revere. But, so far from promoting innovations, we have opposed them, and can be charged with no offence, unless it be one to receive injuries and be sensible of them. (Grand American Continental Congress, 1774)
- (31) it cannot be supposed that we now intend, or ever could have intended, resistance to Great Britain. (Jamaica, 1774)
- (32) while we disapprove and condemn them [measures], we entreat you as the indulgent Father of your People, to view them in the most favourable Light, and to consider them as the honest tho' disorderly, Struggles of Liberty, not the licentious Efforts of Independence (New York, 1775)

- (33) We mean not to become independent of the British Parliament; on the contrary, we cheerfully acknowledge our Subordination to it as the grand Legislature of the Empire; (New York, 1775)

The last type of disarmer envisages a justification/apology for the unconventionality of the language used. As a matter of fact, the direct attack on the MPs displays a strong contempt of Parliament which falls outside the deferential protocol of the genre and requires redress (Zaret 2000). In addition, the identity construction of George III – who, as a liberal and constitutional sovereign, cannot but justify the vehemence of his subjects' language in the defence of their rights – inevitably impinges on his positive and negative face through the force of boosters such as *we apprehend* and *we are persuaded* or *will therefore*, indicating the high investment of the authors in the validity of the proposition and in the expectation/construction of the king's understanding:

- (34) Your Majesty's unexampled Goodness will, therefore, pardon the Bitterness of our Grief, at the gradual, though not less dangerous Diminution, of this ancient Badge of English *Liberty*. (New York, 1764)

- (35) and as your Majesty enjoys the signal distinction of reigning over freemen, we apprehend the language of freemen cannot be displeasing. (Grand American Continental Congress, 1774)

- (36) Could we represent in their full force, the sentiments that agitate the minds of us your dutiful subjects, we are persuaded your Majesty would ascribe any seeming deviation from reverence in our language, and even in our conduct, not to any reprehensible intention, but to the impossibility of reconciling the usual appearances of respect, with a just attention to our own preservation against those artful and cruel enemies, who abuse your royal confidence and authority, for the purpose of effecting our destruction. (Second Continental Congress, 1775)

In all probability, what the colonists failed to appreciate was that as a limited constitutional monarch, George III did not have all the freedom of action that they assumed. If he had tried to act in accord with the colonists' requests, he would have lost support of Parliament and this would have very probably provoked a constitutional crisis (Shain 2014, 15).

4.4 Support move: sweeteners

Sweeteners are the third type of support move. Their pervasive presence in my dataset is indicative of the colonists' formal adherence to the high deferential expectations of the petition genre. Described as expressions which exaggerate appreciation of the addressee's ability to comply with the request, sweeteners are aimed at lowering the imposition involved in the request and show respect and deference towards both the positive and negative face of the interlocutor (Blum-Kulka and Olshain 1984). In petitions, however, the colonists' identity construction of George III as *the best of kings* (5 occurrences) whose *paternal care* (6 occurrences) and *royal attention* (7 occurrences) make him a *loving/indulgent/prudent Father* (5 occurrences) and *Guardian of Liberties* (3 occurrences) creates strong expectations of compliance, which, by means of their reiteration, may either accidentally or intentionally aggravate the king's negative face. In this

sense, the analysis of sweeteners requires caution since they may be deployed to accommodate multiple goals: they may be used as face enhancing expressions of trust which fall within the deferential protocol of petitions, but they can also be part of a strategic manoeuvre to enforce compliance through emotional manipulation (Wartenberg 1990, 111).¹³

The intense approval of the king is voiced in petitions through praising, showing gratitude for and acknowledging evidence of the king's willingness to protect his colonists' rights. The petition sent by Congress in 1764 pre-modifies the request by means of a long sweetener which is aimed at assuming/constructing the successful preconditions for the fulfilment of the colonists' requests:

- (37) With Hearts therefore impressed with the most indelible Characters of Gratitude to your Majesty [...] *and convinced by the most affecting Proofs of your Majesty's Paternal Love to all your People, however distant, and your unceasing and benevolent Desires to promote their Happiness*, We most humbly beseech your Majesty, that you will be graciously pleased to take into your Royal Consideration, the Distresses of your faithful Subjects on this Continent [...] (Massachusetts-Bay, Rhode Island, Providence Plantations, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, the Government of the Counties of New-Castle, Ken and Sussex, upon Delaware, Province of Maryland, 1765, my emphasis)

As time passes and conflict escalates, the encoding of sweeteners in the proposition assumes a more challenging/impositive force as indicated by the choice of the verb phrase. In the petitions issued by the First and Second Continental Congress, the colonists venture into the use of *must* (in one case promptly softened by the understater *we presume*) and boosters (e.g., *we are confident*, *we doubt not*, and *in the fullest assurance*) through which they maximize their expectations that the king – in light of his royal wisdom and paternal care – shares the colonists' constitutional concerns and will behave in the desired way:

- (38) To a sovereign, who “glories in the name of Briton,” the bare recital of these acts *must*, we presume, justify the loyal subjects who fly to the foot of his throne and implore his clemency for protection against them. (Grand American Continental Congress, 1774, my emphasis)
- (39) Your majesty, we are confident, justly rejoices, that your title to the crown is thus founded on the title of your people to liberty; and therefore *we doubt not* but your royal wisdom *must approve* the sensibility that teaches your subjects anxiously to guard the blessing they received from divine providence. (Grand American Continental Congress, 1774, my emphasis)
- (40) *in the fullest Assurance* that your paternal Care is extended over all your People, as well the Inhabitants of the new World, as those who flourish, and are happy under your more immediate Influence in the old, we are emboldened to throw ourselves at your Majesty's Feet, humble Petitioners, in Behalf of the loyal Colony which we represent. (Second Continental Congress, 1775, my emphasis)

¹³ Emotional manipulation is considered as a sub-type of influence. A exercises (or attempts to exercise) power over B by means of an appeal to B's emotions that keeps B from being able to make an autonomous and rational decision (Wartenberg 1990, 111).

- (41) *we have not the least Doubt*, but that by your merciful Mediation and Interposition, we shall obtain the desired redress, and have such a System of Government confirmed to us by your Majesty (Second Continental Congress, 1775, my emphasis)

If, on the one hand, the colonists' facework reflects their desire to resolve the controversy peacefully, on the other, their discourse behaviour gradually shifts into face aggravation as a result of their intransigence to negotiate. Indeed the implication seems to be that if the king continues to deny redress, then the premises on which the request is advanced – i.e., his care and attention for liberties and his respect for the constitutional principles by which his authority is sanctioned – would prove automatically untenable, with strong repercussions on his institutional reified power and legitimacy.¹⁴ This is another instance of ambivalence in the argumentative construction of American petitions which reveals the existing political division within the Congress. In this regard, the ambiguity deriving from the different stances of the American congressmen accounts for the double function of sweeteners, oscillating between markers of deference (as expressions of a moderate stance) and boosters of expected compliance (as expressions of a radical one). Petitioners presumably hoped that their overt profession of loyalty would have reassured the king, but the increasing indeterminacy about their primary goal in petitioning – whether to obtain redress or delegitimize Parliamentary sovereignty as a pretext to execute their revolutionary plans – was ultimately construed by the king-in-Parliament as indicative of their malicious dissimulation. The armed conflicts of Concord and Lexington in April 1775 did nothing but exacerbate Britain's mistrust.

4.5 Support move: cost minimizers

The last type of support move in terms of frequency (3 occurrences) is the conventional formula used to minimise imposition on the negative face of the king. In my dataset, cost minimizers appear in the closing section of petitions in 1768 when colonists, after having obtained the repeal of the Stamp Act 1766, reinitiate their struggle for the repeal of the Townshend Acts (1767-1768):

- (42) we must humbly beseech your Majesty to take our present unhappy circumstances under your Royal consideration, and afford us relief *in such manner as in your Majesty's great wisdom and clemency shall seem meet* (Massachusetts Bay, 20 Jan. 1768, my emphasis)
- (43) we humbly implore your Majesty's gracious Recommendation to Parliament, that your American Subjects may be relieved from the operation of the Several Acts made for that Purpose, *in such manner as to the Wisdom of your Majesty and Parliament may seem proper* (Massachusetts Bay, 7 July 1768, my emphasis)

From 1769 onwards, cost minimizers disappear as petitions become progressively more threatening to the king's freedom of action given the colonists' increasing urgency to obtain immediate redress of their grievances. In this regard, the last section of my analysis is devoted to those more overt manifestations of face aggravation which must have been perceived by the king and his entourage as indicative of the colonists' revolutionary plan.

¹⁴ Nellis refers to the Olive Branch Petition as “a fascinating bit of historical confusion”. He explains that “for the Continental Congress to say that it would pledge allegiance to the King while rejecting Parliament's authority to do anything in the colonies was a bit like asking the King to denounce Parliament” (2019, 95).

4.6 Deviations from the deferential protocol of the petition: instances of FTAs

There are FTAs which remain indeterminate as to the colonists' primary goals in the petition, whether to obtain redress no matter the cost to the king's face (the move can be located somewhere between the incidental and accidental face attack depending on the colonists' awareness of a potential offence being taken) or whether to intentionally aggravate the king's position through fearmongering and threat of future retaliation should he refuse to comply (intentional face attack). This indeterminacy between intentional and incidental/accidental face attack is initiated by the Massachusetts Assembly (1768), probably the most outspoken opponent of Great Britain's policy, and then repeated several years afterwards by the Grand American Continental Congress (1774), the Jamaica Assembly (1774) and the New York Assembly (1775):

- (44) if these Acts of Parliament shall remain in force, and your Majesty's Commons in Great Britain shall continue to exercise the power of granting the property of their fellow-subjects in this province, your people must then regret *their unhappy faith in having only the name left of free subjects*. (Massachusetts Bay, 20 Jan. 1768, my emphasis)
- (45) [...] tat your Majesty, as the loving father of your whole people, connected by the same bands of law, loyalty, faith and blood, though dwelling in various countries, will not suffer the *transcendent relation formed by these ties, to be farther violated*, in uncertain expectation of effects, that if attained, never can compensate *for the calamities* through which they must be gained. (Grand American Continental Congress, 1774, my emphasis)
- (46) We, your Petitioners, do therefore beseech your Majesty [...] to become a mediator between your European and American subjects, and to consider the latter, [...] as equally entitled to your protection and the benefits of the English Constitution, *the deprivation of which must dissolve that dependence on the parent state*, which it is our glory to acknowledge, [...] should this bond of union be ever *destroyed*, and the Colonists reduced to consider themselves as tributaries to Britain, *they must cease to venerate* her as an affectionate parent (Jamaica, 1774, my emphasis)
- (47) that we love and reverence our venerable parent, and that no *Calamity would be so truly afflicting to us, as a Separation from her* (New York, 1775, my emphasis)

The examples show an escalation of potential face aggravation in the language chosen. In 1768, the if-clause (ex 44) anticipates a retaliation which is still left unexpressed, since the colonists limit themselves to lamenting their resulting condition of slavery without questioning their dependence on the mother-land. In the next quotations, on the other hand, the retaliation takes shape through a lexicon of conflict (ex 45, 46, 47) which is necessarily face-threatening to the king as we can see from the selection of words such as *violated, calamities, destroyed, separation, dissolve that dependence*. This language of opposition, although intended to push the king towards the desired solution rather than to trigger a war of Independence, might have had its role in the failure of the diplomatic negotiations. That this increasing rhetoric of separation must have alarmed the king and Parliament is documented by the Parliament's peace overture in February 1775, where the Prime Minister and his MPs, for the first time, promised they would no longer levy taxes on the colonies. What was expected to be welcomed as an olive branch

from Parliament was rejected by a radical leaning Congress on July 22. The Committee made up of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Richard Henry Lee demanded that Parliament completely surrendered its right to tax and pass legislation touching the internal life of the colonists, an issue which had already been touched in petitions since 1764 (see petitions issued by New York, Massachusetts and Virginia). Published in the *Pennsylvania Packet* on August 7, 1775, the report of the American Committee showed that the time was ripe for the issuing of the Declaration of Independence and for the inevitable war that followed.

Conclusion

American colonists chose the petition genre as a diplomatic discourse practice to obtain redress of their grievances. In doing so, they appealed to the British tradition which saw petitioning as an indispensable right of the British people since it safeguarded the maintenance of other constitutional rights (Muller 2017; Huzzey and Miller 2020). By opting for petitioning the king, colonists profusely adhered to the language of humility, deference and supplication which the genre dictated. In this regard, the analysis has shown the many mitigating strategies that accompanied the petitioners' requests in the form of support moves: from grounders to disarmers and from sweeteners to cost minimizers. Even so, the American petitions remained an inevitable diplomatic failure. Once they arrived at Court, the petitions were largely ignored by the king and even American agents in London experienced great embarrassment in presenting them to the Court to the point that some dropped the American cause while those who persevered (such as Benjamin Franklin and Arthur Lee) found themselves scorned by Parliament and their influence completely nullified. This suggests that the language of pacification deployed in petitions was ultimately insufficient to soften the threat to the reified power of the monarch and Parliament actualized in the requests. After all, the clash of reality paradigms between the colonists and the king made the former's facework particularly difficult. While American petitioners grounded their requests on the inalienable constitutional rights which had been granted to their ancestors since their early settlement, the king supported the full legislative power of Parliament over the colonies. On account of their subordinate role, the choice for the colonists was either to back down and lose the argument or venture into a set of face threatening acts, no matter how rhetorically mitigated. In my analysis, I have attempted to show how this complex redressive facework is traceable in the double-edged character of many support moves which, while ostensibly saving the positive and/or negative face of the authors and the institution of the monarchy, at a deeper level ends up deviating from normative behaviour, not only by impinging on the king's freedom of action but also implying criticism of his administration. This ambivalent rhetoric which characterizes the petitioners' argumentation prompts reflections over the multiple goals of its authors, also in view of the fact that the members of the colonial assemblies first, and the representatives of the continental congress later, had opposite views over America's future, either as a dependent or independent state from Britain. These different perspectives were negotiated in discourse in order to construct the image of a community of adherents who shared unanimous consensus over their requests to the king. The construction of the colonists' collective identity was of paramount importance for the desired outcome of the diplomatic confrontation as was their strategic construction of the king's identity. Through forms of self-(re)presentation, colonists shaped a collective identity of loyal subjects who love their parent state but at the same time are aware of their rights and privileges as Britons. Through forms of other-presentation, they construct the identity of George III as a liberal king who loves his subjects and is willing to protect and defend their rights from unconstitutional

abuses, even when they are perpetrated by his own Parliament. While their self-presentation helps the colonists to protect their face, perplexities remain as to the efficacy of their facework towards the king. Constructing a praiseworthy identity for George III and assuming that it is in his political and economic interests, as a liberal king of a great Empire, to comply with the requests of his colonists means to attempt to exercise power over him through influence and emotional manipulation. If the indirectness found in many persuasive moves from 1764 to 1769 may be said to be consistent with the protocol of the petition, the direct attack on the king's MPs which characterizes the last petitions deviates from it, thus revealing the ambivalent attitude, and at times ambiguous argumentation, of the colonists oscillating between FTAs and deferential conventions in the futile attempt to find a convincing balance between the two.

Although the colonists' primary intention appears to be the achievement of a peaceful solution, the intransigence of their requests is such that no alternative is ultimately left to the king. In this sense, despite a certain ambiguity of intent, their requests appear to be closer to Goffman's incidental category of face attacks, since they are performed in spite of their offensive consequences, given the "constitutional emergency" of the colonies' situation, although, presumably, not out of spite as shown by the petitioners' reiterated professions of loyalty to the mother-land at least until July 1775. The negative outcome of the American petitions shows that the expectation of the colonists' unconditional submission to Parliamentary sovereignty was so entrenched in the king-in-Parliament's mind that any request which fell outside this paradigm was very likely to fail dramatically – and this despite the reconciliatory, though at times confusing, intentions of the petitioners.

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