## HOW TO ASK FOR A FAVOR

A Case Study on the Success of Altruistic Requests



Tim Althoff, Cristian Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, Dan Jurafsky Stanford University & Max Planck Institute SWS

## What makes a request successful?

Here: Focus on language effects

1.Does the language of a request matter?

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- 2.Can we understand how language matters and quantify its effects?

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- 2.Can we understand how language matters and quantify its effects?
- 3.Can we predict which requests will be successful based on linguistic and social factors?

#### IMPORTANCE

Understanding success factors of requests













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 Extends work in social psychology on helping behavior to online settings (e.g. status, urgency, reciprocity, gratitude)











#### IMPORTANCE

Understanding success factors of requests

- Extends work in social psychology on helping behavior to online settings (e.g. status, urgency, reciprocity, gratitude)
- Practical implications for online communities













Could you please donate \$1 ?

Could you please donate \$100?

**What** 

Could you please donate \$100?

What

If you do, you'll get Google Glass in two weeks.

**Incentive** 

Could you please donate \$100? What

If you do, you'll get Google Glass in **Incentive** two weeks.

17,392 people have already donated. **Group Dynamics** These last \$100 would make us reach our final goal.



# WHAT MAKES REQUESTS SUCCESSFUL?

How to control for all these confounds and focus on language?

What

**Incentive** 

**Group Dynamics** 



#### RANDOM ACTS OF PIZZA

online community devoted to giving away free pizza to strangers

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"because... who doesn't like helping out a stranger? The purpose is to have fun, eat pizza and help each other out. Together, we aim to restore faith in humanity, one slice at a time."

www.randomactsofpizza.com

#### DATASET

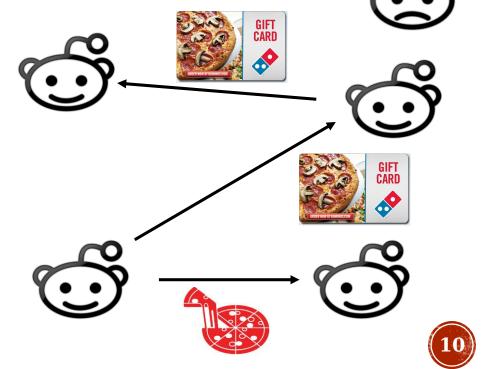
- 21k total posts between December 2010 and September 2013
- Focus on users that post a single request
- Average success rate: 24.6%

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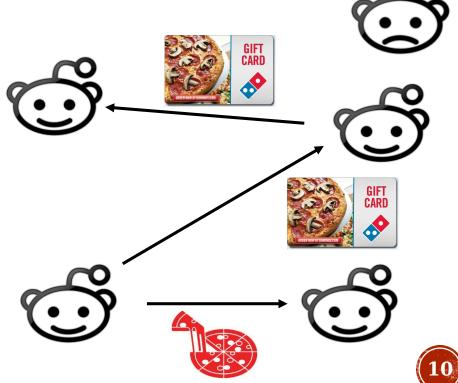


#### DATASET

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#### **Ideal situation**

- All requests ask for same thing
- No additional rewards
- Requests satisfied by single user
- Requests embedded in social network





"My gf and I have hit some hard times with her losing her job and then unemployment as well for being physically unable to perform her job due to various hand injuries as a server in a restaurant. She is currently petitioning to have unemployment reinstated due to medical reasons for being unable to perform her job, but until then things are really tight and ANYTHING would help us out right now. I [...] would certainly return the favor again when I am able to reciprocate."

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"My g job an unable

a serve

**Evidentiality:** Urgent requests are met more frequently than non-urgent requests (Yinon and Dovrat 1987; Shotland and Stebbins 1983; Colaizzi, Williams, and Kayson 1984; Gore, Tobiasen, and Kayson 1997)

Bank Accounts

Checking - 1491

Saving - 7127

Saving - 7127

Investment accounts

Balance

\$0.49

\$5.60

osing her ysically juries as hing to

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"My friend is coming in town for the weekend and my friends and i are so excited because we haven't seen him since junior high. we are going to a high school football game then to the dollar theater after and it would be so nice if someone fed us before we embarked:)
[Thank you!]"

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[Thank you!]"

**Politeness:** A person experiencing gratitude is more likely to behave prosocially towards their benefactor and **others** (Tsang 2006; Bartlett and DeSteno 2006; McCullough et al. 2001; Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al. 2013)

```
Sentiment: Are requests that exhibit strong sentiment (positive or negative) more likely to succeed?

(Forgas 1998; Milberg and Clark 1988)

game to the dollar theater after and it would be so nice if someone fed us before we embarked:)

[Thank you!]"
```

"My friend is friends and i since junior I game then to nice if someo [Thank you!]".

**Status:** People of high status (e.g. occupation or wealth) receive help more often. (Solomon and Herman 1977; Goodman and Gareis 1993)

OliverTw1st
2,989 link karma
1,251 comment karma
send message redditor for 2 years

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14

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- •Length: total number of words in request

14

#### MEASURING FACTORS

- Temporal Factors: Controlling for temporal or seasonal effects
- **Reciprocity:** Detect phrases like "pay it forward" or "return the favor"
- •Length: total number of words in request
- Evidentiality: Presence of an image link (86% of images in random sample included some kind of evidence)

• **Politeness:** Extract all 19 politeness features from the computational politeness model in (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al. 2013)

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- Status: karma points (up-votes minus down-votes) & user account age

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- 1. Money: "Broke until next paycheck. [...] I had to pay to get my car repaired this week, leaving me with little money until next Friday when I get paid again."
- 2. **Job:** "He lost his job last week and I had to pay his month's rent, and I'm going to have to until he finds another job."
- 3. Student: "Studying for finals, no time to go get food. Im studying for my last batch of finals before applying to college in the fall (transfer student, community college path)."

4. Family: "Help out a Dad please? [...] My daughter is 2 and we usually do a pizza and movie night every once in a while, and she's been asking about it. [...] I try to not let my wife know exactly how bad we are when it gets like this."

- 4. Family: "Help out a Dad please? [...] My daughter is 2 and we usually do a pizza and movie night every once in a while, and she's been asking about it. [...] I try to not let my wife know exactly how bad we are when it gets like this."
- 5. Craving: "I went out with some friends earlier in the week and ended up lending my friend 20 bucks til he could get to an ATM. Long story short, we ended up pretty silly drunk and crashed at different houses [...]."

Coefficient	Estimate
Community Age (Decile)	$-0.13^{***}$
First Half of Month (Binary)	$0.22^{**}$
Reciprocity (Binary)	$0.32^{**}$
Length (in 100 Words)	$0.30^{***}$
Including Image (Binary)	$0.81^{***}$
Gratitude (Binary)	$0.27^{**}$

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> p < 0.001, \*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05

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#### **Temporal Controls**

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Including Image (Binary)	0.81***	<b>Evidentiality</b>
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Coefficient	Estimate
Strong Positive Sentiment (Binary) Strong Negative Sentiment (Binary)	$0.14 \\ -0.07$
Karma (Decile) Posted in RAOP before (Binary)	0.13*** 1.34***
Narrative Money (Binary) Narrative Job (Binary)	$0.19^{**} \\ 0.26^{**}$
Narrative Student (Binary)	0.09
Narrative Family (Binary) Narrative Craving (Binary)	$0.22^{*} \\ -0.34^{***}$

**<sup>19</sup>** 

Coefficient	Estimate
Strong Positive Sentiment (Binary) Strong Negative Sentiment (Binary)	$0.14 \\ -0.07$
Karma (Decile) Posted in RAOP before (Binary)	0.13*** 1.34***
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Narrative Family (Binary) Narrative Craving (Binary)	$0.22^* \\ -0.34^{***}$

#### **Sentiment**

**<sup>19</sup>** 

Coefficient	Estimate
Strong Positive Sentiment (Binary) Strong Negative Sentiment (Binary)	$0.14 \\ -0.07$
Karma (Decile) Posted in RAOP before (Binary)	0.13*** 1.34***
Narrative Money (Binary)	$0.19^{**}$
Narrative Job (Binary)	$0.26^{**}$
Narrative Student (Binary)	0.09
Narrative Family (Binary)	$0.22^{*}$
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#### **Status**

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#### **Narrative**

	Short Request
Length	50 words
Narrative	Craving
Picture	
Gratitude	
Reciprocity	

	Short Request
Length	50 words
Narrative	Craving
Picture	
Gratitude	
Reciprocity	
	9.8%

	Short Request	Displaying Need
Length	50 words	50 words
Narrative	Craving	Job & Money
Picture		
Gratitude		
Reciprocity		
	9.8%	

	Short Request	Displaying Need
Length	50 words	50 words
Narrative	Craving	Job & Money
Picture		
Gratitude		
Reciprocity		
	9.8%	19.4%

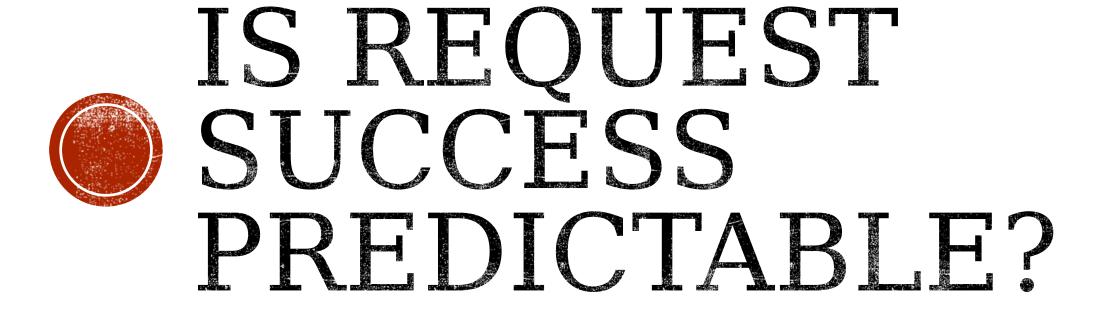
	Short Request	Displaying Need	Optimized Request
Length	50 words	50 words	150 Words
Narrative	Craving	Job & Money	Job & Money
Picture			✓
Gratitude			✓
Reciprocity			✓
	9.8%	19.4%	

How to get pizza!

	Short Request	Displaying Need	Optimized Request
Length	50 words	50 words	150 Words
Narrative	Craving	Job & Money	Job & Money
Picture			✓
Gratitude			✓
Reciprocity			✓

(19.4%)

(56.8%)



Predicting held-out requests (1.6k)

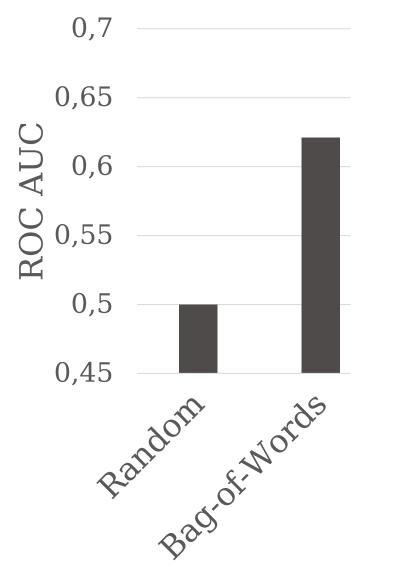
- Predicting held-out requests (1.6k)
- Features:
  - Temporal: Control factors
  - Social: Status, User account age
  - Linguistic Insights: Reciprocity, Length, Evidentiality, Politeness, Sentiment, Narratives

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- Features:
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- **Model:** L<sub>1</sub> penalized Logistic Regression model

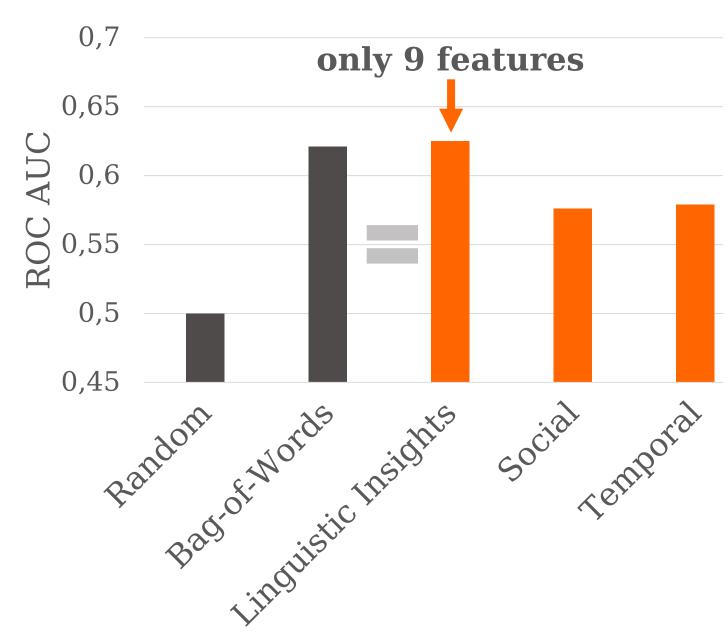
•

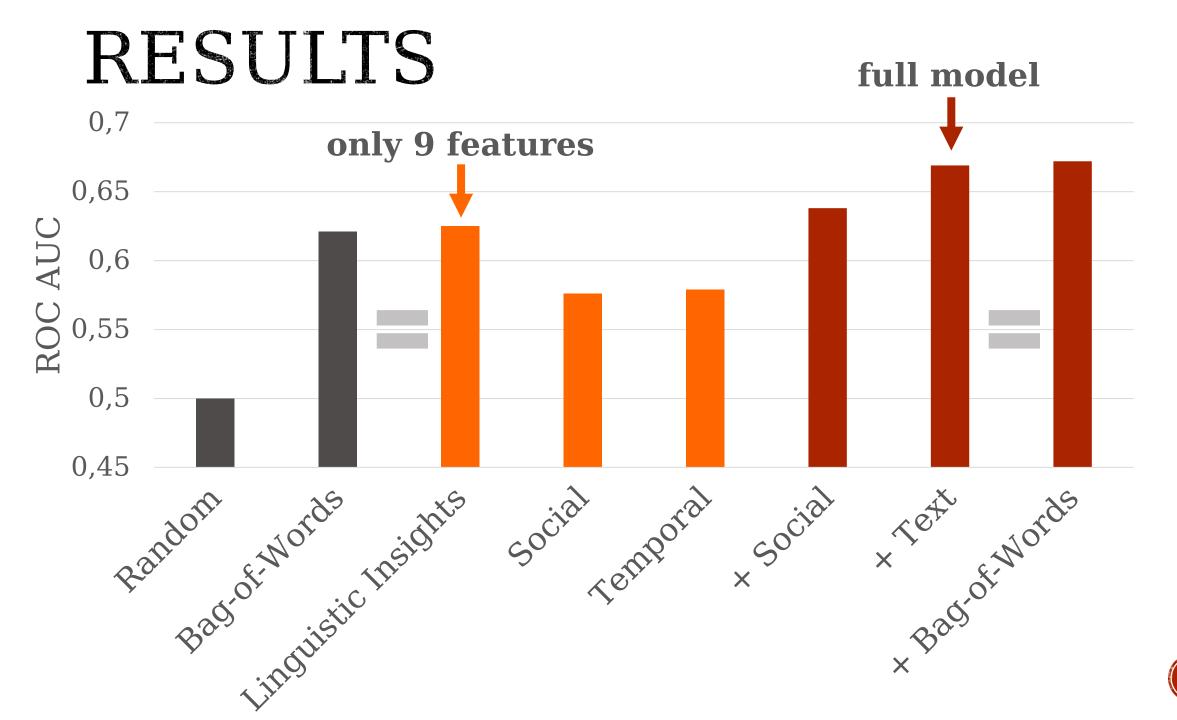
- Predicting held-out requests (1.6k)
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  - Temporal: Control factors
  - Social: Status, User account age
  - Linguistic Insights: Reciprocity, Length, Evidentiality, Politeness, Sentiment, Narratives
- Model: L₁ penalized Logistic Regression model
- **Metric:** Area under receiver operating characteristic curve (ROC AUC)

### RESULTS



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## Language matters! A lot! Dataset of requests controlling for what is requested (publicly available)



#### We tied narratives to success



## Generalized reciprocity matters: Promise to pay it forward



# Pro-social behavior toward requestors who are of high status or expressing gratitude



#### Success is predictable! Practical implications for online communities

#### THANK YOU!







### OBACKUP SLIDES



#### • [Request] Hungry student wants to surprise colleagues at RAOP presentation

submitted 5 months ago by omega81

Please help out my friend (http://www.reddit.com/user/schummelpilz/). He doesn't use reddit much so he can't post himself. Here is his post:

TL/DR: Presenting a class project on RAOP tomorrow. Want to surprise attendees with delicious pizza.

I have been working on a project on Random Acts of Pizza for a class on social media and social network analysis. For the last months I stared at pizza requests and offers and learned about this community (looking at all the pizza photos can be really hard when you're hungry!). It's been a fun project and I am very grateful for the help I received from Reddit. For instance, I learned that claiming to forward pizza makes you more likely to succeed. However, only 25% of pizza'd users seems to actually follow through. I could claim that myself but who would really believe me now? Therefore I chose to give pizza myself last week to prove that I'm actually a huge fan of what this subreddit is doing and that I'm happy to help out myself. Including images also seems to be appreciated. Here is one of me presenting another poster: http://i.imgur.com/wMKfqup.jpg

Tomorrow at noon (PST) I will present my project to at least a hundred people at a poster session. It would be absolutely amazing to have some pizza there! Giving out free pizza would

- 1) be in the spirit of this community and this work
- prove to the doubters that RAOP "works"
- attract more people to come learn about RAOP

Obviously, I don't need to feed everybody, just a small pie would be a beautiful statement and could restore peoples' faith in humanity :-)

If you help us out I promise to share another picture at our poster with the pizza! Thank you all!

11 comments share save hide give gold report



[Request] Hungry student wants to surprise colleagues at RAOP presentation

submitted 5 months ago by omega81

Including images also seems to be appreciated. Here is one of me photos car from Redd 25% of piz

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11 comments share save hide give gold report

t post

sis.

bizza

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only

#### POLITENESS FEATURES

Strategy	Politeness	In top quartile	Example					
1. Gratitude	0.87***	78%***	I really appreciate that you've done them.					
2. Deference	$0.78^{***}$	70%***	Nice work so far on your rewrite.					
3. Greeting	$0.43^{***}$	45%***	Hey, I just tried to					
4. Positive lexicon	$0.12^{***}$	32%***	Wow! / This is a great way to deal					
5. Negative lexicon	-0.13***	$22\%^{**}$	If you're going to accuse me					
6. Apologizing	0.36***	53%***	Sorry to bother you					
7. Please	0.49***	57%***	Could you <b>please</b> say more					
8. Please start	$-0.30^{*}$	22%	Please do not remove warnings					
9. Indirect (btw)	0.63***	58%**	By the way, where did you find					
10. Direct question	$-0.27^{***}$	15%***	What is your native language?					
11. Direct start	$-0.43^{***}$	$9\%^{***}$	So can you retrieve it or not?					
12. Counterfactual modal	0.47***	52%***	Could/Would you					
13. Indicative modal	0.09	27%	Can/Will you					
14. 1st person start	0.12***	29%**	I have just put the article					
15. 1st person pl.	$0.08^*$	27%	Could we find a less complex name					
16. 1st person	$0.08^{***}$	$28\%^{***}$	It is <b>my</b> view that					
17. 2nd person	$0.05^{***}$	30%***	But what's the good source you have in mind?					
18. 2nd person start	$-0.30^{***}$	17%**	You've reverted yourself					
19. Hedges	$0.14^{***}$	28%	I <b>suggest</b> we start with					
20. Factuality	$-0.38^{***}$	13%***	In fact you did link,					

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1 Length (in 100 Words)														
2 Community Age	-0.14***													
3 First Half of Month	0	-0.01												
4 Including Image	0.08***	-0.03*	0											
5 Gratitude	0.22***	-0.05***	0.01	0.02										
6 Reciprocity	0.09***	0	-0.02	-0.01	0.09***									
7 Karma	-0.03*	0.36***	0	0.03**	-0.05***	0.03*								
8 Posted in RAOP before	-0.03*	0.10***	0.01	0	0.01	-0.01	0.07***							
9 Strong Positive Sentiment	0.10***	-0.04***	0	-0.01	0.21***	0.08***	-0.02	-0.03*						
10 Strong Negative Sentiment	0.10***	-0.03	0	-0.02	-0.09***	0	0.02		-0.28***					
11 Narrative Craving	0.15***	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02	-0.01	0.02		0.05***	-0.01				
12 Narrative Family	0.10***	-0.09***	-0.02	-0.03*	0.06***	-0.03*	-0.10***	-0.02	0.04***	0.04**	-0.02			
13 Narrative Job	0.01	0.05***	0.02	-0.04**	0.01	0.06***	0.03*	0	0.01	0.03*	-0.05***	-0.01		
14 Narrative Money	-0.07***	0.06***		-0.05***	0	0.11***	0.03*	-0.01	-0.03	0.04**	-0.06***		0.15***	
15 Narrative Student	0.10***	-0.02	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03*	0.03	-0.01		0.05***	-0.00			0.06***



• [Request] I have gotten pizza before from this subreddit, but it's Easter, and I'm stuck at school because finals for me start tomorrow, and I'm broke.



comment share





66

[Request] I've been working on my first computer for 6 hours, only to find my GPU was DOA. Can someone hit me up with some pizza please?

submitted 3 days ago by bigbootypanda
4 comments share

67

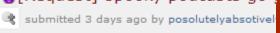
• [Request]It's 4/20 and Liverpool FC are top of the table. Having some friends of mine over to celebrate the win and the last week of classes before we graduate but I can't shell out that much for pizza considering what else I'm providing. Anyone feel like helping out?

submitted 2 days ago by HumanautPassenger

1 comment share

<sub>58</sub> 🛦

[Request] Spooky podcasts go great with pizz



comment share









●[REQUEST] I know this is a long shot. But I've come to the end of college and have drained my funds for it 100% I am currently waiting on an email from said college that will basically determine my future. I have never been so stressed or scared. Pizza would be a comfort. Promise to pay it forward.

submitted 3 days ago by mrshansgruber

3 comments share