Asymmetry markers in discourse: The expressive meaning of bitte ‘please’

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1 Introduction

The article puts forward an analysis of the German expressive marker bitte ‘please/there (you are)’ that does not treat it as a politeness marker or modifier on directive speech acts, pace Levinson (1983), nor as an explicit marker of directive illocutionary force, pace Searle (1979). Instead, we take the expressive element bitte to indicate speaker-hearer asymmetries in epistemic, circumstantial or deontic authority, independently of sentence type and illocutionary force. The analysis in terms of asymmetry-marking explains why German bitte has a wider distribution than English please, and why it can trigger attenuating effects (politeness), as well as strengthening effects.

2 Previous analyses and the challenge of bitte

Both Searle (1979) and Levinson (1983) link the distribution of the English expressive marker please tightly to the notion of directive speech acts. Searle (1979) analyses please as an explicit marker of directive speech acts with the same illocutionary function as full directive verbs like to ask to. As a directive marker, please is correctly predicted to occur in imperatives (cf. (1a)), in yes/no-interrogatives conventionally used to express indirect directive speech acts (cf. (1b)), as well as in directive declaratives (cf. (1c)), but not in ordinary assertive declaratives like (2a), nor in non-directive 3 PERS yes/no-interrogatives like (2b).

(1)  a. Pass me the salt please!
    a’. Reich mir bitte das Salz! [German]
    b. Can/Could you please pass me the salt?
    b’. Kannst du mir bitte das Salz reichen? [German]
    c. You will please leave my house to-morrow morning!
       (C. Klein, 2007: The Lion and the Mouse)
    c’. Du verlässt morgen früh bitte mein Haus! [German]

(2)  a. *(Please), the wind is (please) blowing.
    b. # Has Peter please left already?

   In a similar vein, Levinson (1983) treats please as a modifier on directive speech acts, which is typically introduced for reasons of politeness. Neither analysis carries over to the German element bitte, however, as the distribution of bitte surpasses the domain of directive speech acts. Next to occurring in imperatives and expressions with indirect directive force (cf. (1a’–c’)), German bitte, or its extended variant bitt(e) schön, can
also be used by speakers on executing transactions of possession (3a), as well as in wh-interrogatives (3b). Neither utterance expresses a directive speech act, but the presence of bitte typically induces a politeness effect in such cases (Brown & Levinson 1987).

\[(3)\]
\[
a. \text{Hier ist bitte (schön) das Geld.}
\]
\[\text{here is BITTE the money}
\]
\[\text{‘There you are, here is the money.’}
\]
\[
b. \text{Wer (bitte) hat (bitte) geläutet?}
\]
\[\text{who BITTE has BITTE called}
\]
\[\text{‘Who has called please?’}
\]

Interestingly, this politeness effect with bitte is absent in the declarative clauses in (4a–b), where the Upper German variant bitt’ schön induces a strengthening effect:

\[(4)\]
\[
a. \text{[A:]} \text{But, there is no need for such haste! [A. Schnitzler: Die Toten schweigen]}
\]
\[
\text{[B: Bitt’ schön, gnä’ Herr, der Sturm, der macht die Rösser so wild.}
\]
\[\text{BITTE mylord, the storm, it makes the horses so wild}
\]
\[\text{‘I beg your pardon, mylord, it is the storm that makes the horses restless.’}
\]
\[
\text{[A:]} \text{Ah yes, of course, the storm.}
\]

\[
b. \text{Das hat bitt schön eine ganz andere Qualität.}
\]
\[\text{that has BITTE a quite different quality}
\]
\[\text{‘That is of quite a different quality, you know!’}
\]

The challenge posed by the German data is thus twofold: (i) How to account for the wider distribution of German bitte in declaratives and interrogatives (cf. (3a–b))? (ii) How to give a unified semantic analysis for the simultaneous licensing in directives and non-directives, and for the different semanto-pragmatic effects of politeness and strengthening?

### 3 Discourse markers of speaker/hearer asymmetries

In response to these questions, we take up an idea by Zeevat (2000), which is further elaborated by Kim & Wee (to appear). According to these authors, discourse particles in Dutch and the discourse particle hor in Singapore English (SE) should be analysed as markers of non-standard discourse situations that involve a speaker-hearer asymmetry in epistemic or deontic authority concerning the proposition expressed. For Zeevat (2000), following Stalnaker (1978), the discourse conditions on standard (ideal) assertions are such that the hearer is expected to accept the speaker’s assertion without objection. In the ideal case, then, an assertion need not be marked in any special way for the transfer of information to succeed, be it by means of special intonation, a particular syntactic structure, or the insertion of discourse particles. Actual discourse situations often fall short of this ideal, though, in that the transfer of information from speaker to hearer is blocked by various contextual factors: e.g., the speaker may already know, or suspect, that the hearer’s beliefs concerning a proposition \(p\) differ from her own. Such non-ideal discourse situations require special strategies for facilitating information transfer, and extra marking by means of discourse particles is one such strategy.

Kim & Wee (to appear) apply Zeevat’s idea to the analysis of the SE particle hor as a marker of non-standard discourse contexts with a speaker-hearer asymmetry in epistemic
or deontic authority, where authority may lie with the speaker (S) OR the hearer (H), depending on context. As hor can occur in declaratives (DECL) and imperatives (IMP), four possibilities arise:

(i) hor + DECL + epistemic authority with H: S requests information from informed H (= declarative question, Gunlogson 2003), cf. B in (5a);
(ii) hor + DECL + epistemic authority with S: S tries to impose an opinion on H, who may hold a different belief (= strengthening), cf. (5b);
(iii) hor + IMP + deontic authority with H: request/demand (= politeness), cf. (5c);
(iv) hor + IMP + deontic authority with S: command, cf. (5d). Interestingly, hor is absent in wh- and yes/no-questions as witnessed by (5e–f):

(5) a. [A:] I bought a Prada wallet yesterday.
     [B:] You are very rich, hor?

b. These people really too much hor. Someday, if I ever come across any of them, I will bite their high nose off. I very angry. (≈ (4a–b))

c. (photographer to students:) Stand in line hor. (≈ (1a)/(1a'))

d. (sergeant to soldiers:) Stand in line hor.

e. *Where’s the box, hor?

f. *Is the box empty, hor?

Kim & Wee attribute this to a second, speaker-centered meaning component of hor, which requests or forces the hearer to be in the same mental state with respect to the proposition expressed, somewhat similar to the effects encountered with the German discourse particle ja (Lindner 1991; Kratzer 1999). In the case, of (5e–f), this would mean that H should also be in a state of ignorance concerning the whereabouts and condition of the box, contradicting the speaker’s desire for information. The presence of hor would thus counteract the original intention of the question, again similar to what is found with ja, which is also blocked from occurring in questions (König 1977).

4 Extending the analysis to bitte/bitt(e) schön

4.1 Basic cases

The analysis of discourse markers as indicating S-H asymmetries can be directly applied to the case of German bitte/bitt(e) schön. Unlike its purported counterpart please on the analyses of Searle and Levinson, the presence of bitte is not constitutive or indicative of directive speech acts per se. Its licit occurrence in assertions and non-directive questions shows, instead, that the expressive meaning of bitte is unspecified for illocutionary force (also see section 5). Rather, the main function of bitte seems to lie in expressing a sub-component of illocutionary acts, according to Searle (1979), namely ‘differences in the position of speakers’, or — in our terms — differences in deontic, circumstantial or epistemic authority. In view of the fact that directive speech acts, such as requests or commands, involve such S-H asymmetries by their very nature, the frequent occurrence of bitte in directive speech acts does not come as a surprise. At the same time, generalising the notion of authority to instances of epistemic authority accounts for the presence of bitte in questions and answers.

More formally, the expressive marker introduces a felicity condition in form of a partially defined identity function, as in (6), where E, D, and C stand for epistemic,
deontic, and circumstantial, respectively, while leaving the propositional content of the clause, and its illocutionary force unchanged (Potts 2005). Importantly, unlike hor, bitte imposes no requirement on the hearer to have the same mental state concerning the proposition expressed, which accounts for its licit occurrence in questions (3b).

(6) \[\text{[bitte]} = \lambda p: \text{there is a S-H asymmetry in E/D/C-authority concerning } p.\]

The notion of authority in (6) is similar to, but more general than the notion of (epistemic) judge in Laserson (2005), McCready (2006), and Stephenson (2007). Authority does not only refer to an interlocutor’s privileged knowledge state concerning \((\neg)p\), with assertions and questions, but also to her capacity or ability to bring about certain states of affairs described by \(p\) as desired by the speaker, as is the case with with directives.

What kind of authority is involved, and whether the authority lies with the speaker or the hearer, is largely determined by sentence-type, context, and world knowledge, where the observed flexibility is reminiscent of modal auxiliaries, the modal base of which is determined by contextual factors as well (Kratzer 1991). With declarative assertions (4ab) and with \(wh\)-questions (3b), both of which operate on the epistemic domain (Lohnstein 2000), the use of bitte/bitt’ schön serves to mark the epistemic authority of S and H concerning \(p\), respectively. For instance, in declaratives like (4ab), bitte highlights the marked state of affairs that it is S that is in a position to control whether \(p\) becomes common ground against any potential objections by H. This accounts for the strengthening effect. In interrogative questions, the presence of bitte stresses the fact that it is H that controls whether or not \(p\) becomes common ground, the default obtaining with interrogatives (Truckenbrodt 2006). Bitte in interrogatives may thus be used in marked discourse situations where H has exhibited some reluctance to provide the requested information, or else, its presence may simply acknowledge the privileged epistemic state of H, inducing politeness.

By contrast, the use of bitte in directive utterances (cf. (1a’–c’)) and in utterances accompanying transactions (3a) signals deontic, or circumstantial, authority (= (5c–d)). With imperative requests and indirect orders, as in (1a’–c’), the authority lies with H, who has the capacity to bring about the state of affairs desired by the speaker. On the transaction use of bitte in (3a), though, the authority lies with S, who determines whether or not she hands over a given entity. Imperative orders and requests, as in (7a–b), likewise involve a commanding or obliging authority on the side of the speaker:

(7) a. (police order:)

\[
\text{Treten Sie bitte zurück!}
\]

\[
\text{stand you please back!}
\]

‘Please stand back!’

b. Nimm bitte einen Apfel!

\[
\text{take please an apple}
\]

‘Take an apple, please!’

4.2 Evidence I: No bitte without S-H asymmetry

The analysis in (6) correctly predicts bitte to be infelicitous in all contexts where it is clear that there is no difference in the epistemic states of S and H, i.e., when both have the same knowledge states, or in their deontic or circumstantial states, i.e., when both have the same legitimation or capacity to bring about \(p\). Bitte is thus infelicitous in the
wh-interrogative (8a) because it is clear from the context that neither S nor H are in a position to answer the question. For the same reason, bitte is categorically ruled out in the Vfinal ob-interrogative in (8b), which expresses mutual ignorance by its very linguistic form (Truckenbrodt 2006).

(8) Context: A and B are lost in the woods while hiking. A asks B:

a. # Welches ist bitte der Weg aus dem Wald?
   which is bitte the way out the forest
   ‘What would (#please) be the way out of the woods?’

b. # ob das (bitte) der richtige Weg ist (bitte)?
   if this bitte the right way is bitte
   ‘Will/Would this (#please) be the right way?’

Likewise, bitte is ruled out in the Let’s-imperative in (9a), because all interlocutors are in an equal position regarding the bringing about of p. As a consequence, the only available reading for (9a) is an asymmetric request reading, overtly marked by non-cliticization of the pronoun in English, on which the hearer(s) is/are in a privileged position concerning the bringing about of p (9a.ii). Finally, bitte does not occur in permissive imperatives, where S has no commanding/requesting authority (S), nor does H have circumstantial authority regarding the bringing about of p. In such cases, S-H symmetry can be overtly indicated by means of the expressive marker ruhig ‘if you will’.

(9) a. Lasst uns bitte gehen!
   let us BITTE go
   i. # ‘Please let’s go!’
   ii. ‘Please let us go!’

b. Nimm ruhig/# bitte einen Apfel!
   take if you will/please an apple
   ‘Take an apple if you will!’

4.3 Evidence II: Co-occurrence restrictions with discourse particles

Further evidence comes from the observable co-occurrence restrictions on bitte with discourse particles. The proposed analysis predicts the felicitous co-occurrence of bitte (schön) in declaratives containing the discourse particle doch, which indicates an asymmetry in the epistemic states of S and H concerning p (Lindner 1991), cf. (10a). Conversely, its co-occurrence with the particle ja is blocked, as in (10b), since ja marks the fact that S and H (should) both have access to the information expressed by p on its default non-adversative reading. Hence there is no asymmetry in epistemic authority (Lindner 1991; Kratzer 1999).

(10) a. [A:] Look at the way that person is dressed! I wonder how he got in.

   [B:] Bitt schön gnä Frau, das ist doch der Landeshauptmann!
   bitte mylady, that is PRT the head of the federal state
   ‘Beg your pardon, mylady, that is the Landeshauptmann (didn’t you know?)’

b. # Bitt schön, du hast ja ein Loch im Pullover!
   bitte you have PRT a hole in the jumper
   intended: ‘bitte, you have a hole in your jumper, y’ know?’
To conclude, the analysis of *bitte* as an expressive marker of S-H asymmetries in epistemic, deontic, or circumstantial authority not only accounts for its occurrence in declarative assertions and interrogative questions, next to all kinds of directive utterances, but it also captures its absence in symmetric discourse situations and the co-occurrence restrictions with discourse particles expressing (a)symmetries in the epistemic states of S and H. In the next section, we will briefly consider an alternative account.

5 Generalising the Searle/Levinson-account: An alternative?

An alternative account of the wide distribution of *bitte* in directives, assertions, and questions would consist in adopting a generalised version of Searle’s and Levinson’s analysis of *please* as a marker of directive speech acts by widening the class of directive utterances. For instance, one could assume with Truckenbrodt (2006), among others, that not only syntactic imperatives and sentences with indirect directive force, but all major syntactic sentences types encode directive speech acts. According to this view, the three major sentence types express the directive illocutionary meanings in \((11a–c)\), respectively, where the directive force of declaratives and interrogatives is due to the fact that these sentence types grammatically encode requests for additions to the Common Ground (Sternaker 1978) by accepting or making a statement; see Truckenbrodt (2006) and references therein.

\[(11)\]
\[\begin{align*}
\text{a. Imperative: } & <\text{Deont}, A> \quad \text{‘S wants from A . . . ’} \\
\text{b. Declarative: } & <\text{Deont}, A, <\text{Epist}> > \quad \text{‘S wants from A that it is common ground . . . ’} \\
\text{c. Interrogative: } & <\text{Deont}, A, <\text{Epist}> > \quad \text{‘S wants from A that it is common ground . . . ’}
\end{align*}\]

Given the illocutionary meanings in \((11a–c)\), the expressive marker *bitte* might be given a unified analysed as a reduced version of the directive illocutionary verb *bitten* ‘to ask (for)’, as in *I ask you to bring about p*, with imperatives, *I ask you to accept the information p*, with declaratives, and *I ask you to provide the information p*, with interrogatives. While this alternative analysis may well provide an adequate account for certain sentence-initial occurrences of *bitte*, it is empirically inadequate as an analysis of the sentence-medial instances of *bitte* discussed in the present paper. First, the alternative analysis overgenerates: Since the three sentence-types in \((11a–c)\) are indiscriminately analysed as expressing directives, independent of contextual information, *bitte* is predicted to be licit in any declarative, interrogative, or imperative sentence, contrary to fact. In particular, the alternative analysis fails to account for the absence of *bitte* in the matrix *wh*-question in \((8a)\) and in exhortative and permissive imperatives in \((9ab)\), as well as for the marked status of *bitte/bitt(e) schön* in declarative assertions, which require a specific (S-H asymmetric) discourse context. Second, the analysis undergenerates as it does not account for the accompanying use of *bitte/bitte schön* with transactions of possession, as in \((3a)\), which is not directive and therefore not synonymous to the explicit request in \((12)\).

\[(12)\] *Ich bitte dich, nimm das Geld!*

I implore you take the money

\[\neq \text{(Hier ist) bitte schön (das Geld)! } [= (3a)]\]

‘There you are, (here is the money)!’
Notice, moreover, that (3a) is routinely used in situations where payment, or any other transaction, is customarily expected, for instance, at the cashier in a shop. This is problematic since directives involving the verb bitten ‘to ask to’ are generally infelicitous in situations in which it is obvious that H will do p in the normal course of action, independently of the speaker’s request. One cannot ask for something that would have happened anyway, as pointed out by Searle (1969: 59), but still bitte is licit in (3b).

Finally, observe that by generalising the potential for expressing directive speech acts to all major sentence types, we lose the original account for why the distribution of the expressive marker please in English is restricted. The narrower distribution of please would thus either necessitate a reanalysis of this element as not marking for directives, which would go against the original motivation for extending the directive account to German bitte. Or else one would be forced to postulate a bipartition in the realm of directive speech acts. On the latter view, there would be discourse-internal directives that affect the updating of the epistemic states of the discourse participants and discourse-external directives affecting the ‘real’ extra-linguistic world in form of real action. Only the latter would be marked or modified by please.

Given the observed problems with the alternative account, we thus conclude that the proposed analysis of bitte as a marker of (contextually induced) S-H asymmetries is empirically more adequate, and that the superficially synonymous expressive elements please and bitte come with different discourse-semantic functions on closer inspection.

6 The relation of bitte and bitten ‘to ask’: Grammaticalisation and semantic bleaching

Despite the failure of analysing bitte/bitt(e) schön as a reduced form of the illocutionary lexical verb bitten in contemporary German, their similarity in phonological shape suggests that the two items are diachronically related, such that the expressive marker is derived from the lexical verb by a process of grammaticalisation and hence semantic bleaching. If so, the question arises as to which meaning components of the lexical verb are retained in bitte/bitt(e) schön. Here, we argue that the only meaning component that is retained is the inherent notion of asymmetry that exists between petitioner and addressee in directive speech acts involving the illocutionary verbs bitten or to ask to. The felicitous use of such verbs by S presupposes that H is in a position to bring about p, as shown by the deviant status of (13a). And it at least conversationally implicates that S cannot bring about p, as shown by the presence of the concessive marker although in (13b), presumably due to a quantity implicature that lets one only ask for things that one cannot bring about by oneself. In short, a crucial part of the meaning of the verb bitten consists in expressing the fact that H has the circumstantial authority to bring about p.

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(13) a.  
   # I ask you to have blue eyes.

   b.  
   Peter asked Mary to close the window although/# and he could have done it himself.

By contrast, in utterances containing the expressive marker *bitte* the authority lies not necessarily with H. As shown in section 4.1, the presence of *bitte* in imperative orders and requests, in utterances accompanying transactions of possession, as well as in declarative assertions, overtly indicates that it is S that is in the possession of deontic, or circumstantial, or epistemic authority, respectively. Thus, while the directive meaning component of the verb *bitten* has been bleached, the authority component has been retained albeit with a greater degree of flexibility.

7 Conclusion

The analysis of *bitte/bitt(e) schön* as an otherwise under-specified marker of speaker/hearer-asymmetry in authority provides a unified account of its wider distribution compared to the English expressive marker *please*, and the various semanto-pragmatic effects observed with this particle. More generally, asymmetry markers in natural language play an important role in effectively organising a discourse by facilitating the transfer of information, or the conveyance of orders and requests, from speaker to hearer. They thus help the discourse participants in obtaining their communicative goals in a maximally efficient way.

REFERENCES


