

**On the Flexibility of *Please***  
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**1. Introduction**

This paper is concerned with the sentence adverbial *please* (hereafter *please*), which is used when a speaker asks a hearer to do something, giving some flavor to the request intended by the speaker, as in *Will you please open the door?* Previous studies concerning this adverb are roughly divided into two groups: One is concerned with under what condition *please* is used, that is, the study of its usage environment, including Gordon and Lakoff (1971), and Sadock (1974), among others. These studies have reached a consensus on that matter, claiming that the occurrence of *please* is restricted to the context which conveys a request, that is, it requires a “request context.” The other is concerned with for what purposes *please* is used, that is, the study of its function, including Leech (1983), Stubbs (1983), and Brown and Levinson (1987), among others, and focusing mainly on the politeness function of *please*. A closer inspection will show, however, that there are both conceptual and empirical problems with the two types of previous analyses.

As for the idea of *please* as requiring a “request context,” we can find that the idea alone does not give a sufficient explanation of its distribution, and that *please* occurs mainly in requests, but not all types of requests require *please*. Thus, the notion of “request” should be reexamined closely enough to predict correctly the possibility of its occurrence. As has been often pointed out, the distribution of *please* has more to do with facts about contexts and cultural environments, i.e. with pragmatics than with grammar. Yet it is still unclear what pragmatic aspects are relevant to it, or more fundamentally, why it is that the use of *please* is affected immensely by pragmatic factors. We will compare *please* with the other sentential adverbial *kindly*, the use of which is also limited to “request contexts,” adding a polite flavor to them, as in *Will you kindly open the door*. This comparative study will give a good basis for solving these problems.

As for the idea of *please* as a marker of politeness, on the other hand, we

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\*We are grateful to Minoru Nakau and Yukio Hirose for careful guidance and constant encouragement. We would also like to express our appreciation to the following people for their helpful comments and suggestions: Hiromitsu Akashi, Hiroaki Konno, Kazunori Kan and Mina Kasai. In addition, our special thanks go to Marco Amati and Fiona Watanabe, who kindly acted as informants and encouraged us to do this work. All remaining errors and inadequacies are, of course, our own.

will be faced with the fact that it is also used in order to make requests strong. Why is it that *please* can have these opposite functions? To explain this, we will take the position that the adverb is lexically neutral in this respect. On close inspection, we will see that it exhibits a neutral behavior in some other respects. These neutral properties of *please* can give a principled solution to the problem of why *kindly* is distributionally more restricted than *please*, that is, the problem of the flexibility of *please*.

The aim of this paper is to give a solution to the problem of how to deal with the flexibility of *please*. In fact, *please* is flexible in two respects: It can occur in a variety of contexts and it can have a variety of functions or meanings. It will be argued that *please* is susceptible to the process of "pragmatic specialization," and that the susceptibility of that pragmatic process is strongly related to the degree of flexibility. Before entering directly into that matter, let us first take a brief survey of how previous analyses describe the properties of *please*, and make clear what can and cannot be explained by them.

## 2. The Environment and the Function of *Please*

### 2.1. The Condition of Requiring a "Request Context"

As Gordon and Lakoff (1971) (hereafter G&L) and Sadock (1974) have pointed out, there is a condition under which *please* can be used. These studies agree with each other in that the notion of request is crucially relevant to the usage condition of *please*. The idea presented by them is rather simple, and is summarized as follows: *Please* is used only when a relevant context conveys a request. (In this paper, we will sometimes refer to this condition as the condition of requiring a "request context." By "context," we mean both sentence-external and sentence-internal contexts.) In fact, *please* can occur with syntactic imperatives and other kinds of sentences that convey a request.

- (1) a. *Please* bring me a towel.
- b. Bring me a towel, *please*.
- c. *Please*, can you open the window?
- d. Would you *please* remove your car?

The acceptability in (1) is correctly predicted by the condition of requiring a "request context," since the sentences, without *please*, can convey a request.

As Sadock (1974) points out, (1c) is considered to be ambiguous between a request and a yes-no question, yet it is disambiguated when *please* is inserted. Given this fact, it might be argued that *please* is regarded as a marker of a request. Yet it is highly doubtful whether *please* itself contains the request

sense, since it does not occur with the contexts which do not convey any request sense, as in the following:

- (2) a. \* He ate more pudding, *please*.  
 b. \* I promise you can have more pudding, *please*.  
 d. \* Do you want to come to a party, *please*? (Stubbs (1983:72))

These examples express the situations of a statement, a promise, and an invitation, in which we cannot find any request context, and thus the impossibility of *please* in (2) is due to the violation of the condition of requiring a "request context." This fact suggests that *please* does not create a request context, but only requires the context.

The observations made so far imply that the distribution of *please* is more relevant to a semantic, contextual environment than to a surface syntactic environment (in this respect, see also Levinson (1983:271) and Grundy (2000:61)). This is shown by the following examples:

- (3) a. *Please*, it's cold in here.  
 b. *Please*, it's ten o'clock. (G&L (1971:74))

Here the sentences following *please* do not have the forms of interrogatives and imperatives, yet they can express a request with the help of what Grice called conversational implicatures. That is to say, as G&L point out, since they "conversationally convey a request," they do satisfy the condition of requiring a request context. Important is the fact that the possibility of *please* is not affected by whether a request is specified conventionally or contextually.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.2. *Please as a Marker of Politeness*

So far, we have focused on the distribution of *please*, and observed that it is restricted to a request context. Our focus will be shifted to what functions it has as its original function. Before exploring this problem, we should notice that *please* is generally known as a politeness marker. Here we will take a brief survey of some previous studies which characterize it as such.

Sadock (1974:88) points out that *please* often serves to soften explicit

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<sup>1</sup> As G&L (1971:74) point out, however, the possibility of *please* in final position is affected by whether a request is specified conventionally or contextually.

- (i) a. \*It's cold in here, *please*.  
 b. Get me a drink, *please*.

As (i) shows, statements that conversationally convey requests do not permit final *please*, while it can occur with sentences that contain overt requests. Although the difference between overt and covert requests has something to do with the position of *please*, there is no need to enter into details about this fact for the purpose of this paper. Here we need focus only on the fact that the insertion of *please* is possible when a request is present in a given context, irrespective of the overt or covert implication of the request.

requests or to render them more polite:

- (4) a. *Please* don't handle the merchandise.  
 b. Passengers will *please* refrain from expectorating.  
 c. Pass the remoulade, *please*. (Sadock (1974:88))

In these cases, *please* adds a polite flavor to the expressed or implied requests. He says, however, that this softening function has become so weak in present-day English. In contrast to Sadock, Stubbs (1983:71) argues that *please* has no specific meaning, and should be analyzed as a functional item that serves only as "a marker of politeness or mitigation."

Brown and Levinson (1987) (hereafter B&L) also emphasize the politeness function of *please*. They show that the degree of indirectness corresponds to the degree of politeness, claiming that the more indirect a request becomes, the more polite the request becomes (in this respect, see also Leech (1983)). B&L (1987:130) characterize the relation as such that indirectness creates "hedges on illocutionary force." B&L argue that the effect of indirectness is brought about by some grammatical means: to use questions, subjunctives, assertions, tag forms, negations, to add possibility operators (e.g. *possibly*) or *please*, and so on.

- |        |  |              |             |
|--------|--|--------------|-------------|
|        |  | indirectness | less polite |
| (5) a. | Pass me the salt.                                | ↓            | ↓           |
| b.     | I want you to pass me the salt.                  |              |             |
| c.     | Can you pass me the salt?                        |              |             |
| d.     | Could you pass me the salt?                      |              |             |
| e.     | Could you possibly pass the salt <i>please</i> ? | ↓            | ↓           |
|        |  |              | more polite |

(cf. Leech (1983:108) and B&L (1987:135))

Notice that the degree of indirectness increases gradually from (5a) to (5e). Here it is important to note that *please* is regarded as one of the grammatical means to increase the degree of indirectness. Thus it seems to be true that the politeness function of *please* is attributable to the fact that it has the function of making an utterance indirect.

Even if so, however, there remain two questions: Why is it that indirect requests tend to be more polite and why can *please* have the effect of indirectness? Leech (1983) gives a straightforward answer to the first question: Indirect illocutions "increase the optionality" of the hearer. In (5), for example, the degree of indirectness correlates with the degree to which the hearer is allowed the option of not performing the intended action, i.e., passing

the salt to the speaker. Leech (p.108) thus argues that “the point of strategy of indirectness is to bias the impositive more and more towards the negative choice, so that it becomes progressively easier for the hearer to say ‘no’” to the speaker. Hofmann and Kageyama (1986:57) also point out that “what we really consider to be real politeness in requests or commands is to give the addressee the freedom to do it or not, as he likes” (see also Hofmann (1993:86)). In fact, as Leech (1983:108) points out, we should not overlook the fact that some indirect illocutions function as impositives; that is, the correlation between indirectness and politeness is not always established. For example, compare *Won't you sit down?* with *Can't you sit down?*. The former conveys an offer, rather than an impositive, while the latter typically has an impositive force, though both are taken to be indirect illocutions. Thus, it can correctly be argued that it is the degree of “optionality,” rather than that of indirectness, that directly corresponds to the degree of politeness.

Given this, as an answer to the second question, we can claim that the politeness function of *please* is closely related to the adverbial phrase *if you please* or the impersonal construction *if it please you*, from which, as Quirk et al. (1985:572) observe, *please* is historically derived; both of the phrases in effect increase the degree of optionality for the hearer to say ‘No’. It can thus be argued that the politeness function of *please* is motivated by the high degree of “optionality” the adverb might have or at least it had.

### 3. Discussion

In the previous section, we have outlined the two types of previous analyses. One is concerned with the usage environment of *please*. We have seen that the condition of requiring a request context plays a role in explaining the distribution of *please*. On close inspection, however, we will show some problems which cannot be explained without clarifying the notion of “request.”

The other type of previous analyses we have dealt with is concerned with the function of *please*, namely, the politeness function, which is one of the most well known functions of *please* and can be attributed to the high degree of optionality the adverb originally had. This section will see, however, that *please* can have some effect other than politeness.

#### 3.1. *Vagueness of the Notion of “Request”*

Although we basically agree with the idea that *please* requires a “request context,” the idea does not fully specify the distribution of *please*. Consider the following examples, cited from Hofmann and Kageyama (1986:56).

- (6) a. \* *Please* put the meat on first, so it will be done on time.  
 b. \* Why don't you *please* put the meat on first.  
 c. \* *Please* take 2 pills after each meal.

There is a broader sense in which the sentences in (6), without the adverb *please*, describe situations which contain the sense of request; they ask the hearers to do the denoted actions by giving suggestions or advice. Thus, the above unacceptability cannot be captured by the idea that *please* is restricted to the context which has the sense of request.

As for (6b), one might argue that the form of *why don't you...* cannot occur with *please* for some reason. However, there is a context in which *please* is allowed to occur with *why don't you...*, as in the following:

- (7) "Listen, if you like that book so much *why don't you please*  
 take it home." (cf. Konishi (1989))

It is clear that the contrast in acceptability between (6b) and (7) is treated insufficiently by the condition of requiring a "request context."

In a strict sense, however, it might be argued that requesting something may be conceptually different from suggesting something. Based on this, the unacceptability of (6) can be explained by saying that they do not satisfy the condition of *please*. Nevertheless it is still unclear why the difference between the two concepts brings about the difference in acceptability. The clarification of the notion of *request* might be required in order to give a full account of the related facts. Further, the contrast between (6b) and (7) remains problematic for the position that a request and a suggestion should be distinguished. In the next section, we will attempt to solve these problems.

### 3.2. *Neutral Status of Please*

Now let us turn to the discussion of the idea of *please* as a politeness marker. The close association of *please* with requests has led some to define it as an illocutionary marker rather than as a politeness marker. In fact, Sadock (1974) claims, as we saw in 2.2., that the softening function of *please* has become weak in the modern English. However, there is a case where *please* functions as a politeness marker alone. This is certified by the following example, which is cited from the movie *Batman Forever*.

- (8) [Edward is a man who pretends a normal human being, and Chase is a doctor who wants to know who the Batman is.]  
 Chase: Who is The Batman, Edward?  
 Edward: Can't tell if you don't say *please*.  
 Chase: You're right, Edward. I didn't mean to be impolite. *Please*.

In this context, we can clearly find the reason why Edward did not answer to Chase's question; for him, the way she asked without *please* is thought to be an *impolite manner*. This is clearly seen in Chase's third utterance 'I didn't mean to be impolite.' That is to say, Edward's attitude of not telling is due to Chase's direct request of him to tell who the Batman is. Thus it is clear that *please* here is taken, at least by Edward, to mark politeness or to add the indirect effect to the request. Faced with this fact, we cannot say that the politeness function of *please* diminished in present-day English.

However, it is inadequate to say that the discourse function of *please* is limited to the addition of a polite flavor to requests. *Please* is used not only as the politeness marker but also as the marker of a forceful request, as is suggested by the following example, cited from the movie *Pretty Woman*.

- (9) [Edward, a special guest of the hotel, is in the bar that belongs to the hotel at midnight. Vivian is Edward's girlfriend. He asks the working staff in the bar to go outside.]

Edward: Gentlemen? Would you mind leaving us, *PLEASE*?

Thank you.

Vivian: People always do what you tell them to do?

The capitalized word *PLEASE* indicates that it receives a pitch accent. In this context, it is without doubt that Edward's use of *PLEASE* in asking the working staff to go outside is motivated by his intention to render his request forceful or strong, but not polite or weak. Thus, the *please* here is not regarded as a marker of politeness, but rather as that of a forceful request.

The facts in (8) and (9) force us to say that *please* has at least two, opposite functions; one is the function that renders a request weak or polite; the other is the function that renders it strong. Speaking from Leech's view of "optionality," as was discussed in 2.2., it could be further argued that *please* is used to both increase and decrease the degree of optionality to say 'No' to requests. Indeed, in (9), the hearer's (the working staff) opportunity of saying 'No' is highly restricted by Edward's use of *please*, even though his utterance includes the softness of using 'Would you... '.

The observation above drives us to the question of why it is that the adverb can carry these two opposite functions. In order to capture this dual status, it is natural to think that *please* is lexically neutral or unspecified for these two functions. This means that it does not specify as its own function either of the two; its contextual properties play a decisive role in determining which function of the two is prior to the other. The next section will further

argue that this neutral behavior is observed in some other areas of pragmatics.

#### 4. How to Deal with the Flexibility of *Please*?

This section will attempt to give a proper treatment of the nature of *please*, focusing mainly on the problems presented in the previous section. We will first survey the notion of "speaker's benefit," which is proposed by Hofmann and Kageyama (1986), and will see how they solve the relevant problems. A closer examination will reveal, however, that the notion of "speaker's benefit" does not play a decisive role in characterizing a true nature of *please* and its distributional behavior. Through a comparative study of *please* and *kindly*, we will argue that *please* shows a more flexible behavior than *kindly*. The reason for the flexibility of *please* will be explored in terms of "being lexically unspecified or neutral." A piece of evidence will be provided in support for the neutral status of *please*, with our attention focused on in what aspects it shows a neutral behavior.

##### 4.1. Hofmann and Kageyama (1986)

Hofmann and Kageyama (1986:55) (hereafter H&K) give us an important insight into a deeper understating of the usage of *please*. The key concept of their analysis is "speaker's benefit." Taking the position that *please* is not just a marker of politeness, they argue that it has the function of indicating that "the action is to benefit the speaker, and that he will be obliged if the request is properly carried out." The point is that *please* is a speaker-oriented adverb, by which it is meant that the adverb specifies the existence of benefit on the part of the speaker, but not on the hearer.

Now let us take a look at how H&K solve the problem of why a suggestion does not go well with *please*, as discussed in 3.1. H&K think that the difference between a request and a suggestion can be characterized in terms of the presence or absence of the speaker's benefit. Based on our knowledge of the world, it seems to be certain that what is requested is toward the speaker's benefit, whereas what is suggested toward the hearer's benefit. This reasoning seems to be useful in explaining the incompatibility of a suggestion with *please*. Consider again the examples in (6), listed here as (10):

- (10) a. \* *Please* put the meat on first, so it will be done on time.  
 b. \* Why don't you *please* put the meat on first.  
 c. \* *Please* take 2 pills after each meal.

According to H&K(1986:56), the unacceptability of (10) is due to the fact that the orientation of benefit specified by *please* conflicts with the orientation that



the contexts specify. The sentences in (10) are, without *please*, all judged acceptable. If (10a) and (10b), without *please*, are uttered in a learning context, say, by a cooking instructor to his pupils, they are interpreted as an instruction or advice. (10c) is taken as a recommendation or advice of a doctor. Thus it seems to be certain that all of these contexts focus on benefit exclusively on the part of the hearers who receive the advice or instructions.

#### 4.2. Problems with the Analysis Based on "Speaker's Benefit"

Although the facts in (10) seemingly support the idea of *please* as a marker of "speaker's benefit", it is doubtful whether that function belongs only to *please*. The sentence adverbial *kindly* (hereafter *kindly*) shows some similarities with *please* (for details see Quirk et al. (1985:569-72)). The distribution of *kindly* is also limited to contexts that convey a request, and it shares the function of weakening a request with *please*, and even that of emphasizing or strengthening it.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these similarities, *kindly*, like *please*, does not fit into the situation of a suggestion, as in (11).

- (11) a. \**Kindly* put the meat on first, so it will be done on time.  
 b. \*Why don't you *kindly* put the meat on first.  
 c. \**Kindly* take 2 pills after each meal.

An explanation in terms of "speaker's benefit" might be obliged to say that *please* and *kindly* are the same with respect to the orientation of benefit. Therefore, this line of analysis does not give any contribution to the clarification of an original property of *please*, and thus leaving unsolved a fundamental question of *what please really is?*

Further, there are some examples which cast doubt even upon the status of *please* as a marker of "speaker's benefit." Let us consider again the examples of (7) and (6b), reproduced here as (12a) and (12b).

- (12) a. "Listen, if you like that book so much *why don't you please* take it home." (cf. Konishi (1989)) (= (7))  
 b. \* Why don't you *please* put the meat on first. (= (6b))

The form of *why don't you...* is generally used as giving a suggestion to the hearer, and as discussed above, what is suggested is normally taken as benefit for a person who receives the suggestion; it is obvious that the contexts above focus on the hearer's benefit alone. Thus, the observed contrast poses a serious problem to the analysis based on "speaker's benefit"; it wrongly

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<sup>2</sup> As Quirk et al. (1985:570) point out, when *kindly* receives a pitch accent as in *KINDLY be quiet*, it suggests both irritation and a repetition of a more normally uttered request. This illustrates the case where *kindly* is used to strengthen the intended request.

predicts the acceptability of (12a), though it rightly predicts the unacceptability of (12b). Indeed, the contrast goes beyond the notion of speaker's benefit, and an alternative solution is required to capture the contrast as well as the impossibility of *please* in (10). At the end of this section, we will present an entirely different kind of solution, claiming that the notion of "benefit" should be divided into two types with respect to "subjectivity," one of which is related to an important characteristic of such adverbs as *please* and *kindly*.

#### 4.3. *Neutral Behavior of Please Once Again*

The observation made here gives us an important insight into how to treat *please* with respect to the orientation of benefit. Based on the fact shown by (12a), we can argue that *please* can focus on either speaker's or hearer's benefit, just as it functions as either weakening or strengthening requests. Then, again, it may be that *please* is neutral as to the orientation of benefit. Further evidence in support of this is given as in the following:

- (13) a. "*Please*, have some more cake," she said warmly. (attested)  
 b. *Please* give me some more cake.

In most contexts, the speaker of (13a) wants the hearer to take some more cake, because the former thinks that doing so brings some benefit to the latter. On the other hand, the speaker of (13b), in almost every context, has no intention to give benefit to the hearer; rather, the former wants to get benefit from the latter. It is thus obvious that these two imperatives specify a different orientation. Yet *please* does fit into both of the contexts, which strongly certifies the existence of the neutral status.

To say that *please* exhibits such a neutral behavior, however, does not mean that it has nothing to do with the notion of benefit. On the contrary, it strongly signals the presence of benefit in the relevant context. To put it more generally, where there is *please*, there is benefit; the presence of *please* is a sign of the presence of benefit, though the place where the benefit exists is pragmatically determined or specified. As we will see later, the presence of benefit is considered to be what we will call a lexically specialized meaning. Given this, we can predict that *please* is not allowed to occur in a context which lacks the presence of benefit. The prediction is borne out, in fact, by the following example:

- (14) \*Take one more step, *please*, and I'll shoot. (Geukens (1978:270))

(14) includes the force of a threat or warning. It is obvious that (14) cannot have *please* inserted because there exists no benefit in this context. Neither the speaker nor the hearer gets benefit from the hearer's carrying out of the

action described by the imperatives. The fact that the imperative here can be paraphrased into *Don't take any step further, or ...* implies that in this context, the speaker strongly requires the hearer not to take any step further because that action is, for the former, regarded as a disadvantage for the reason unknowable in this limited context. The hearer's disbenefit is also strongly implied by the *and*-sentence which refers to the speaker's threat of shooting or killing the hearer. Thus, it is reasonable to say that the context includes no benefit, but only disbenefit, and this accounts for the impossibility of *please*.<sup>3</sup>

The validity of our analysis is shown by the contrastive behavior of the following sentence, cited from Geukens (1978:270):

(15) Take one more step, *please*, and you will have saved our lives.

Speaking from the viewpoint of the speaker, the *and*-sentence refers to something which is regarded as less objectionable not only for the hearer, but also for the speaker, and the action described by the imperative is, without doubt, taken as pleasant for both of them. It is thus quite obvious that the presence of benefit is identified in this context. This accounts for the contrast in acceptability between (14) and (15). Indeed, the presence or absence of benefit corresponds to the possibility or impossibility of *please*.<sup>4</sup>

It should be noticed that in (15) the context specifies benefit in both a speaker's and a hearer's oriented way. This dual orientation is indicated in the phrase *our lives* in the *and*-sentence. The fact that *please* allows the dual orientation does form conclusive evidence for the neutrality of the adverb. Further, converting *our lives* in (15) into *my life* or *your life* brings no change in acceptability, if any, only in the interpretation with respect to the orientation of benefit. All of these facts verify our idea that *please* does not lexically specify the orientation of benefit, and its specification is determined by some contextual, pragmatic factors.

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<sup>3</sup>Two objections might be possible: One is that the unacceptability of (14) should be attributed to the lack of a "request context." This is not the case, however. As we argue above and Geukens (1978:270) also points out, it is obvious that the imperative here conveys such a strong command or request as is paraphrased into *Don't take any step*. The other is that the paraphrased imperative includes a negation, and negative imperatives might be incompatible with *please*. The objection is easily refuted by the existence of an example like *Don't make a noise, please* or *Please don't make a noise* (cf. Quirk et al. (1985:570)).

<sup>4</sup>Konno (p.c.) suggests that the line of thinking presented here is closely related to Akatsuka's (1998, 1999) analyses of conditionals in terms of the notion of "desirability." In light of her analysis, we can say that *please* does not fit into the situation of "Undesirable leads to Undesirable," but goes well with that of "Desirable leads to Desirable." This is not so surprising if we think that what is (dis)benefit is equated with what is (un)desirable.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the possibility or impossibility of *please* in (14) and (15) is strongly dependent upon some contextual or pragmatic properties. Among those properties, it is the speaker's viewpoint that is the most relevant to the specification of the place of benefit. Indeed, as Geukens (1978:270) points out, if (14) is uttered by a rather sardonic person, it might be acceptable, just as a sentence like "*Commit suicide, please.*" might be possible for that speaker. It can be that the determination of whether or not benefit exists and of where the benefit exists is in control of the speaker's "subjective" judgment. This means that the adverb is concerned with subjective characteristics of an utterance, and it could even be argued that the presence of a subjective benefit is one essential defining property of *please*, the topic of which will be discussed fully in 4.5.

#### 4.4. *Kindly as a Specific Expression*

This neutral status of *please* is not carried by *kindly*. This is one of the crucial differences between the two adverbs. On close inspection of the distribution of *kindly*, we can find that the adverb specifies benefit in a very limited orientation, that is, only in a speaker-oriented way. Therefore, in the context where benefit is obviously understood to exist on the part of the hearer, *kindly* cannot occur. This makes a sharp contrast with *please*:

- (16) a. (*Please/??Kindly*) have some more cake.  
 b. (*Please/??Kindly*) make yourself conformable.  
 c. [to a child] If you like that book so much, why don't you (*please/??kindly*) take it home."

As we discussed above, the sentences in (16), without *please* and *kindly*, can convey a request or a suggestion where the speaker judges or wishes that the denoted actions will bring a pleasure for the hearer. *Kindly* cannot appear in these contexts, because the absence of "the speaker's benefit" conflicts with what *kindly* lexically specifies, that is, the presence of speaker's benefit.

If we prepare a condition where the speaker's benefit is easily identified, *kindly* is not excluded, as in the following:

- (17) a. (*Please/Kindly*) open the door.  
 b. (*Please/Kindly*) help yourself.  
 c. Will you (*please/kindly*) address a few words to the new students ?  
 (Quirk et al. (1985:569))

These facts strongly suggest that *kindly* specifies the presence of a speaker's benefit as its lexical meaning, whereas *please* is neutral as to the specification

of this property.<sup>5</sup> It is this difference that brings about the observed distributional differences between *please* and *kindly*. This provides a fundamental explanation to the problem of why the former is felt to be more flexible than the latter in the distribution.

The neutral/non-neutral contrast between *please* and *kindly* is also observed with respect to the specification of rank relationship. Before entering into this matter directly, let us take a brief look at the discussion made by H&K (1986:56). They make an interesting observation that the use of *please* strongly implies a rank relationship between the speaker and the hearer. If *please* is pronounced normally, there at the end of the sentence, it suggests that the speaker is in control of a relevant situation, as if he is the host or boss.

- (18) a. Have some more cake, *please*. Spk = the cook or host.  
 b. Make yourself comfortable, *please*. Spk = the host  
 c. Could you open the door, *please*. Spk = the boss.

(H&K (1986:57))

As for the last one, H&K (1986:57) and Hofmann (1993:81) observe that the utterance would be quite reasonable if said by the hearer's boss; it implies that the speaker wants the hearer to carry out the described action and has "the right" to ask for the action. The point is that the presence or absence of the right to ask on the part of the speaker is relevant to the proper use of *please*. To illustrate this, Hofmann, as a native speaker, gives us an interesting observation as follows: if you (a student) "said it in my office, I would be insulted and angry, even though it has the softness of using *Could you...*"

Here we should notice that the kind of social ranking seemingly established by the use of *please* is just an implication of *please*, but not the entailment, just as the speaker's benefit is so. That kind of implication is like what Grice called generalized conversational implicatures. It is really often the case that the implication of a word is so strong that it seems as if it is taken as its inherent meaning, yet it is important to distinguish between entailment and implicature to understand the very nature of a linguistic expression. As we will see later, the two correspond respectively to what we will call "lexically specialized meanings" and "pragmatically specialized meanings."

The notion of "defeasibility," whether or not an implication is defeasible, is an empirical basis for distinguishing between the two types of meanings. A

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<sup>5</sup> A native speaker we have contacted with makes an interesting, intuitive suggestion that the use of *kindly* strongly implies that the required action is to benefit the speaker, but not the hearer. This also greatly helps to verify our analysis.

pragmatically specialized meaning is an implication that can be defeated just by saying something opposite to it or something that warns the hearer not to infer what might ordinarily be implied. H&K (1986:11-12) give us a good example to show this; their explanation of the word *nurse* is quite useful to understand the relation between defeasibility and lexically or pragmatically specialized meanings. In the interpretation of the word *nurse*, our common knowledge forces us to say that nurses are women; we almost take it for granted, "so much so that the expression \*a female nurse is definitely strange" (see also Hofmann (1993:21)). Yet being female is not a lexically specialized meaning of the word, but a pragmatically specialized one. This is shown by the acceptability of the expression "a male nurse," which defeats the implication of being female by adding the opposite modifier. Thus, we can say that nurses are lexically neutral as to whether being a female or male.

Let us turn now to a closer examination of whether *please* lexicalizes the implication of the social ranking. As somewhat weaker evidence for the position that this implication is not its lexical meaning, it can be noted that (18c) could be possible, keeping the same social relation (the speaker = a student, the hearer = a teacher). For example, as H&K point out, it can be uttered by a student to his teacher, in the situation where the student is carrying a box of books for the teacher, with his hands full. In this context, the student is doing a favor to his teacher which puts the student "temporarily in command." Here we should notice that the possibility of *please* varies from contexts to contexts, keeping the upper-lower relationship unchanged. This means that the use of *please* is not restricted to the context including the rank relationship in which the speaker is socially upper than the hearer.

More convincing evidence in support of our analysis is the fact that even when uttered by the speaker who is very weak, or socially lower, e.g., children, beggars, or prisoners, *please* is perfectly possible:

- (19) a. The beggar said, "My daughter, God bless you. You are very kind hearted. *PLEASE* give me your this colored shirt for my daughter." (attested) Spk = beggar  
 b. *PLEASE* let me go with you, mummy. Spk = child.  
 c. Could you let me out, *PLEASE*. Spk = prisoner

((19b) and (19c) are from H&K (1986:57))

As indicated by capitalization, *please* in these expressions pronounces very long or strong, as if it were two syllables *plee-ease*, conveying a strong request, such as a begging or plea. The speakers here are considered to be socially or

contextually lower than the hearers, which suggests that *please* does not lexically specify that the speaker is higher than the hearer, and that it is lexically neutral with respect to the specification of the rank relationship.

Again, the adverb *kindly* does not carry this neutral property. It specifies a rank relationship in which the speaker is higher than the hearer. Thus, it is not so surprising that we get the unacceptability of the *kindly* versions of (19), as in the following:

- (20) a. The beggar said, "My daughter, God bless you. You are very kind hearted. ??*Kindly* give me your this coloured shirt for my daughter." Spk = beggar  
 b. ?? *Kindly* let me go with you, mummy. Spk = child.  
 c. ?? Could you *kindly* let me out, *PLEASE*. Spk = prisoner

All these examples suggest that the implication of the rank relationship with *kindly* is not defeasible and can be taken as a lexically specialized meaning.

#### 4.5. Subjective vs. Objective Benefits

Finally, let us return to the first problem of why a suggestion does not go well with *please* and *kindly*, which has been left unsolved.

- (21) a. \*(*Please/Kindly*) put the meat on first, so it will be done on time.  
 b. \*(*Please/Kindly*) take 2 pills after each meal.

The incompatibility of *kindly* seems to be not so problematic, since the adverb does not fit upon a context where a speaker's benefit is not understood. The same line of analysis, however, does not apply to the incompatibility of *please* in (21), since, as we have discussed so far, *please* is possible even when a speaker's benefit is absent.

In order to solve the problem, our attention should be shifted to the fact that the determination of whether or not benefit exists is in control of the speaker's judgment, as was discussed at the end of 4.3. It naturally follows that *please* lexically encodes the speaker's evaluative stance; that is, what is taken as benefit here reflects a rather personal, subjective liking. This implies that the notion of benefit should be divided into two types with respect to "subjectivity" and "objectivity," that is, "subjective benefit" and "objective benefit," and the latter is not relevant to the meaning of *please*. Based on this, we can safely say that *please* (or perhaps *kindly*) signals the presence of subjective benefit, but not of objective benefit. Hence it is not so surprising that *please* does not fit into the contexts in (21); it is too private or subjective to

be used in such an official or objective context.<sup>6</sup>

To corroborate this, let us consider the following example, which is cited from Geukens (1978:271):

(22) \*To stop the boat, *please* head up in the wind.

As Geukens (1978) points out, (22), without *please*, is uttered in a learning context, say by sailing instructor to his pupil, or if printed in a manual, it is of course interpreted as an advice or instruction. Here Geukens makes an interesting observation as follows:

“In a manual you will not find *please* at all. An instructor might use *please* with his pupils out of deference, because apart from the instructor-pupil relation there is also a more immediate personal relation. However, if an instructor would use *please* too often, his pupils might have the impression that what he is asking is a personal favor and not to the point (Geukens (1978:271, footnote 9).”

As is clear from his observation, *please* is an expression which focuses on personal viewpoints, and thus tends not to be used in giving an official suggestion or advice. That is to say, the use of *please* lowers the objectivity of a relevant expression, and elevates the subjectivity. Thus we conclude that the higher the objectivity is, the lower the possibility of *please* is.<sup>7</sup>

This line of analysis also plays a decisive role in explaining the following contrast, which, as we saw, poses a serious problem to H&K.

(23) a. [to a child] “Listen, if you like that book so much why don’t you *please* take it home.” (cf. Konishi (1989))

b. \* Why don’t you *please* put the meat on first. (= (12))

The analysis based on “speaker’s benefit” cannot account for the contrast, since both of the sentences, without *please*, imply only the hearer’s benefit. The reason for the contrast lies in the fact that (23a) and (23b) describe a different

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, in the area of medical ethics, the distinction between subjective and objective benefit is thought to be rather important. This is shown by the fact that in a class of medical ethics, a question like the following is presented as a final exam:

“In class, I argued that when discussing whether doctors should be allowed to lie to their patients, we should distinguish between *subjective and objective benefit*. Explain this distinction...”

It is expected in our society that a doctor must take as important the distinction of subjective and objective benefit. Thus, it is not so surprising that *please* does not fit into the situation of medical care, as described in (21b).

<sup>7</sup> Without the learning context, (22) is possible as in the following:

(i) *Please*, head up into the wind to stop the boat. (Geukens (1978:272))

*Please* here functions as softening an order expressed by the imperative, and more importantly, the interaction in (i) can be taken to be private, rather than public. Hence this fact also verifies our analysis of *please* as encoding subjective attitude concerning benefit.



situation with respect to subjectivity; the former describes a highly personal situation, where, for example, an adult (the speaker) gives a personal opinion to a child (the hearer) who visits the speaker's house, while the latter describes a highly objective situation; our social knowledge tells that a learning context requires a teacher to give an opinion to his pupil in a highly objective manner in the sense of Geukens's (1978) observation. Hence it is obvious that the impossibility of (23b) is due to the lack of subjectivity in the relevant context.

#### 4.6. Summary

To summarize, we have seen that *please* and *kindly* differ at least in two respects; one is in the specification of the orientation of benefit, and the other is in the specification of social ranking. As shown above, *please* is lexically neutral or underspecified in these two respects; their specialization is carried out by pragmatic components. We have further shown that *please* lexically encodes the presence of subjective benefit, and its implication is not defeasible. On the other hand, *kindly* lexically or conventionally carries out the specialization of these two aspects; as a result, we cannot defeat the implications of the speaker's benefit and of the social ranking such as "the speaker-higher-the-hearer." This is reflected in the fact that *kindly* shows a lower flexibility than *please*. The facts obtained here strongly imply the existence of the two kinds of specialization process in constructing a meaning. To end this paper, we will closely examine how these two processes are related to the flexibility of word meaning.

### 5. From Lexical Semantics to Lexical Pragmatics

The analysis presented here has an important, theoretical implication. As is clear from the distributional facts, *kindly* is less common or less frequent than *please*. This, in fact, conforms to a fundamental rule for semantics, or more specifically, lexical semantics: common words have simple meanings while uncommon words have complex meanings; to put it generally, the less common a word is, the more complex its meaning is. Indeed, if a word has a complex meaning, then it cannot be used in many situations. As for *please* and *kindly*, we can say that the latter has more complex meaning in the sense that it has more lexical specifications than the former. That is to say, *kindly* is lexically richer than *please*. Hence it is not so surprising that the frequency of *please* is still higher than that of *kindly*. The point is that the degree of richness in lexical meaning is in inverse proportion to the degree of flexibility.

What we want to emphasize here, however, lies even deeper. It is certain

that *please* has simpler meanings as its lexical meaning, but yet it seems to have more than one meaning or function. In fact, it can have more functions than *kindly*. For example, in addition to the effect of politeness, it has the effect of strengthening, and as a result, sentences with *please* can be a strong command or strong begging. Further, *please* can be used as a marker of either speaker's or hearer's benefit and so on. What linguists offer as definitions for *please* might be more complex than for *kindly*.

It is important to note, however, that what appear to be a number of separate senses or functions are, actually, complexes of a word's inherent content and contextual inference. Thus, what linguists should do is the proper distinction in meaning between an inherent and a contextual property (for the relevant discussion, see Jaszczolt (2002:239-252)). Based on the analysis here, we might say at least that *please* inherently specifies less function than *kindly*. It could even be argued that its function might be just to mark "subjective benefit." With the help of contexts around *please*, it seems to get richer and richer. This is what Ruhl (1989:7) calls "pragmatic specialization."

Here we should notice that *please* is more susceptible to the process of pragmatic specialization than *kindly*. This is because the former has more neutral properties in a sense as we have pointed out so far. The relation between neutrality and pragmatic specialization can be described as follows: the more neutral a word is, the more susceptible the word is to the process of pragmatic specialization. That is, the degree of neutrality is in proportion to the degree of susceptibility to pragmatic specialization.

To make clearer the idea presented here, let us examine the pair of verbs including *take* and *steal*.

- (24) a. The thief took the jewels. (Ruhl (1989:6))  
 b. The thief stole the jewels.

A sentence such as (24a) is usually cited in dictionaries under *take* to indicate that it has the sense of stealing. In almost every contexts, (24a) means that theft had taken place. As Ruhl (1989:6) argues, however, the sense of stealing is not derived from the lexical meaning of *take*, but rather from some pragmatic inferences, such as (i) *jewels are something very likely to be stolen*, (ii) *the action of taking is characteristic of that of stealing*, (iii) *the jewel does not belong to the thief*, and so on. These inferences are based on our knowledge of the world. In (24b), on the other hand, it is without doubt that the sense of stealing comes from the lexical meaning of *steal*. For *take* to get a more specific sense, i.e., 'steal', it must undergo the process of pragmatic

specialization. To put it differently, *take* is more susceptible to that process than *steal*, since the former has more neutral properties than the latter, one of which is relevant to inference (iii) stated above.

Unlike *steal*, *take* is neutral as to whether or not the object of taking belongs to an actor of taking; the specification of the possessive status of a thing which is taken is determined by pragmatic factors. Let us consider the following example.

(25) The thief<sub>i</sub> took his<sub>i</sub> own jewels. (Ruhl (1989:6))

Unlike (24a), (25) does not imply the action of stealing, because the sentence-internal context lexically specifies that what is taken belongs to the actor. Specifying in such a way conflicts with the meaning of *steal*, as is shown by the following:

(26) ??The thief<sub>i</sub> stole his<sub>i</sub> own jewels.

The contrast between (25) and (26) is a good example to show that lexical specifications, unlike pragmatic specifications, are not defeasible.

Here we should notice that understanding or constructing the meaning of a linguistic expression is carried out by a collaboration of lexical specialization and pragmatic specialization. This is what is called "division of labor" between lexical semantics and pragmatics. We will assume that an overall organization of meaning construction as diagrammed in Figure 1.

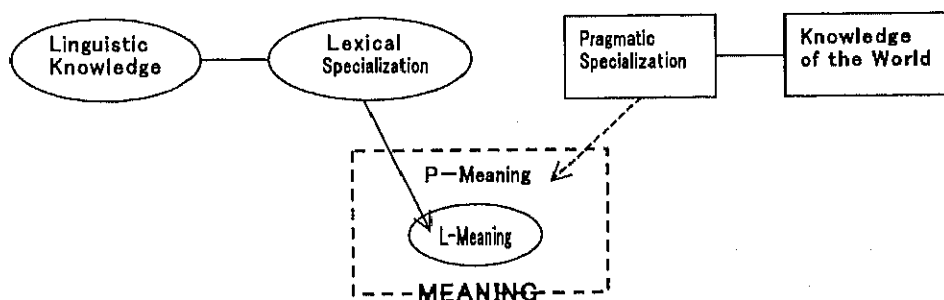


Figure 1.

This organization includes two meaning-specialization processes: *lexical specialization* and *pragmatic specialization*. Each of these has its own basis: *linguistic knowledge* and *knowledge of the world*. The solid and dotted arrows indicate the lexical and pragmatic specializations, respectively, and the solid/dotted difference corresponds to the defeasible/indefeasible meaning. L-Meaning and P-Meaning stand for Lexical and Pragmatic Meanings, which constitute the whole MEANING of a linguistic expression.

To conclude, as is clear from the discussion of *please* and *kindly*, there are those linguistic expressions which cost more pragmatic labor, including *please* and *take*. Such words have more neutral properties than other “non-neutral words” such as *kindly* and *steal*, and the specification of those neutral aspects are pragmatically carried out. In other words, *please* and *take* have more rooms to be filled by pragmatic specializations than *kindly* and *steal*. This is the reason for the fact that the former is felt to be more flexible than the latter in that the former can occur in a variety of contexts and can get a variety of meanings, and this is the reason why the division of labor between lexical semantics and pragmatics is required in order to give a full explanation of the whole meaning of a linguistic expression, as illustrated in Figure 1. There is no doubt that lexical semantics has to interact with pragmatics to explain various word meanings in utterances. Hence it is not so surprising that a new linguistic discipline, “lexical pragmatics” appeared recently (cf. Németh and Bibok (2001) *Pragmatics and the Flexibility of Word Meaning*). Without the clarification of the distinction between an inherent and a contextual aspect in meaning, however, it might be impossible to get the proper treatment of the relation between lexical semantics and pragmatics. We hope that this study will give some contributions to the study of “lexical pragmatics,” the study to account for the division of labor between lexical semantics and pragmatics.

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