

The evolution of a pragmatic marker in German: The formal and functional development of *bitte* ‘please’

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Abstract

The German adverb *bitte* is frequently described as a politeness formula that developed in the 18th century out of the verb *bitten* in 1.ps.sg. usage (*ich bitte* ‘I beg’ > *bitte* ‘please’). Auer & Günthner (2005) propose as a concrete scenario that *bitte* has developed from a matrix verb to a discourse marker of politeness and then to an adverb. However, its formal and functional development has not been investigated in detail to date. In my presentation, I want to shed new light on this phenomenon by analyzing a randomized sample of 4,000 *bitte* attestations taken from DTA and DWDS corpora (17th–20th century, <https://www.dwds.de>) quantitatively and qualitatively.

Early attestations suggest that *bitte* started as a performative verb with own illocutionary force (cf. 1). The request initial phrase *ich bitte euch/Sie* (‘I beg you’) functioned as an external modifier signaling deference. It predominantly occurred with V-pronouns (that encode distance between S and H or inferiority of S; see Brown & Gilman 1960) and in combination with polite volition statements (see Ackermann in press). Contrary to the English adverb *please*, German *bitte* has thus never been a non-imposition marker but evolved from a positive politeness marker.

- (1) *ich bitte euch / jr wöllet diese Historien mit fleiß lesen /* [Calvi, Frankfurt, 1627]
I beg you you will these histories with diligence read
‘I beg you. You will read these histories with diligence’
- (2) *Ich bitte Sie also, mir bald zu antworten [...]* [Tieck, Berlin, 1795]
I ask you therefore me soon to answer
‘So I ask you to answer me soon’
- (3) *Und . . . bringen Sie, bitte, etwas frisches Wasser!* [Holz, Leipzig, 1889]
And bring you please some fresh water
‘And please bring some fresh water’

In the course of time, *bitte* developed into a performative matrix verb (cf. 2). As part of the head act it marks the speaker’s illocutionary intend explicitly. With the development into an adverb, which is observable in the 19th century (cf. 3), the old function of *bitte* (i.e., signaling deference) bleaches more and more. In present-day German, where non-imposition politeness counts as cultural ideal, the adverb *bitte* functions as internal modifier within requestive speech acts (among other functions). Here, it acts as a multifunctional marker that has a mitigating function in explicit requestive strategies with a highly transparent illocutionary meaning (cf. 4), whereas its addition to a less explicit request in a face-threatening context tends to be less polite since it “robs the Query Preparatory strategy its point, as the utterance is thereby marked as a request” (cf. 5; House 1989: 113). Thus, *bitte* is by no means to be considered as a diachronically stable and context-independent politeness marker.

- (4) *Halt mal bitte!*
‘Please hold this!’
- (5) *Kannst du mich bitte heute Nacht abholen?*
‘Can you please pick me up tonight?’

Accordingly, my results are not only relevant for a better understanding of the grammaticalization of *bitte* but also regarding the discussion on the general paradigmatic change from discernment to non-imposition politeness in German (see Jucker 2020 for English).

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