

PLEASE-REQUESTS IN CAMEROONIAN AND KENYAN PRIVATE (SOCIAL) LETTERS¹

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Abstract

This article analyses *please* as it occurs in 300 private (social) letters written between 1990 and 1996 in Cameroon and Kenya. Findings show that *please* functions to mark politeness in private (social) letters but with extended modifiers, a strategy that is perhaps largely influenced by perceived social distance between the writers and the addressees. *Please* is also found to occur in contexts where a direct interpretation of politeness is not very evident. In both instances, however, the study argues that Cameroonian and to a lesser extent Kenyan private (social) letter writers appear to have clear choices and strategies of their own on how to make requests. These choices/strategies could be summarized essentially as the over-use of the form and function of *please*.

1 Introduction

Please falls within a category of words that is sometimes referred to in the literature as pragmatic particles. Pragmatic particles belong to a heterogeneous group of words and are generally associated with different functions in discourse such as politeness issues, indicating the speaker's stance towards his/her own utterance and many others (Brinton 1996, Fraser 1996). However, the most important of these functions as far as *please* is concerned is that of polite requests in interactional discourse (see Searle 1979, Brown & Levinson 1987). A central notion in politeness and requests is "face" (i.e. the speaker's/writer's sense of linguistic and social identity), which appears to be a valuable commodity in all cultures, yet realized somewhat in different ways. Social members are endowed with two kinds of face: "negative face" (the right to territories, freedom of action and freedom from imposition – wanting your actions not to be constrained or inhibited by others), and "positive face" (the positive consistent self-image that people have and want to be appreciated and approved of by at least other people). Participants are assumed to adopt as a global interactional strategy "the diplomatic fiction of the virtual offence, or worst possible reading" (Goffman 1971: 138), i.e. the working hypothesis that face is constantly at risk. Consequently, any kind of linguistic act which has a relational dimension is seen as inherently face-threatening (hence, Face Threatening Acts – FTAs), and needs to be mitigated by appropriate doses of politeness. In other words, FTAs are acts that infringe on the hearer's need to maintain his/her self-esteem, and be respected. Politeness strategies are therefore developed for the purpose of dealing with FTAs.

Obviously, politeness can be realized in many different ways across cultures, and it may be worthwhile for any study on politeness to focus on a number of strategies with which this is often realized. However, *please* seems to be one of those very productive words used to signal politeness in ordinary day speech and in writing, especially in informal context such as letter writing in Cameroon and Kenya. An investigation of the behaviour of *please* in this context may be a useful prelude to a general survey of the phenomenon of request and politeness in written and spoken discourse in African varieties of English.

2 Research on request and politeness phenomena

Extensive empirical studies exist on the politeness phenomenon in general across cultures and languages (see Weizman 1989, 1993, Blum-Kulka 1983, 1987, 1991, House & Kasper 1987, Fukushima 2000, Faerch & Kasper 1989, Sifianou 1992, Edmondson 1981), including the use of *please* in both spoken and written interactions (e.g. Wichmann 2002). Others have specifically focused on individual text type such as email messages written by EFL students (e.g. Liaw 1996, Gains 1999, Herring 1996). These studies highlight the culture/user-specific pragmalinguistic resources and the illocutionary force employed to perform requests. A corollary of this has been to focus on the interactive nature of speech acts, i.e. focussing on the structure of requests, and beyond the sentence level (esp. Edmondson 1981). Faerch and Kasper (1989), for example, conclude that the request proper can usually be accomplished by the Head Act alone, and a modifier(s) can be optional. According to Tracy et al. (1984), the choice of additional strategy such as modifier is a factor of politeness; relating to the desire of the speaker to maintain the face of the hearer and sometimes also to save his own face, as well as try to gain compliance from the hearer. A modifier refers to the peripheral element(s); also known as alerters and supportive moves (see Blum-Kulka & House 1989), as opposed to the core part which is also called Head Act. The following example from the corpus of Cameroonian English illustrates these terms:

- (1) Good morning, please **I need those past questions latest tomorrow.** If you have not brought them with you, it should be the first thing to remember tomorrow. Some other person as yourself [sic] needs them. (PL 137/CCE)

The Head Act (in boldface) is the Core of the request and the other parts (underlined) are modifiers, which can further be subcategorized into internal modification (lexical, i.e. *please*) and external modification (syntactic, i.e.

conditional and *reason* represented by the last two sentences respectively) (see Faerch & Kasper 1989).

Extended modification strategies of this nature are common in private (social) letters found in my corpora. The style is sometimes repetitive and often some external modifying sentences may even be considered redundant. Yet, it is this redundancy that makes *please*-requests perhaps particularly distinctive in Cameroon and Kenya. The aim of this study, therefore, is to investigate the nature of *please*-related requests in private letters written in Cameroon and Kenya.

3 Data and method

Data for the study is derived from the private letters (PLs) component of the corpus of Cameroonian English (CCE) and the social letters (SLs) component of the East-African (Kenya and Tanzania) corpus, which is part of the International Corpus of English (ICE) project (ICE-EA). Since PLs and SLs refer to the same text type in both corpora, I will refer to them subsequently as private social letters (PSLs), where necessary. The letters from ICE-EA are taken from the Kenyan component of the database only, since there were no such letters in the Tanzanian component (Hudson-Ettel & Schmied 1999). Two hundred and fifty PSLs consisting of 88,623 words have been taken from the CCE, and 50 PSLs consisting of 22,300 words from Kenyan section. A KWIC (key-word-in-context) concordance program was used to search the word *please* in the two corpora. The Cameroonian material yielded 201 concordance citations for *please*, while 46 citations were found in the Kenyan corpus. (The initial observation here is that the relatively high frequency in the Cameroonian material may well suggest a greater tendency for the use of this type of request in Cameroon.) Based on the discussion (structure of requests) above, a model such as in Figure 1 below (cf. Sifianou 1992: 99) is constructed and used to classify my data. (Note that the disconnected arrow signifies a new element introduced since the data reveals patterns of the use of *please* that could not fit the model, but which nevertheless were related to politeness.)

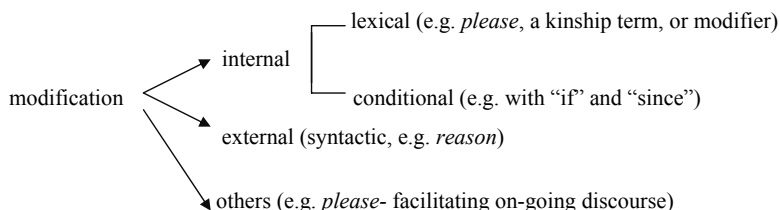


Figure 1: Structure of *please*-requests

Specifically, the study intends to seek answers to the following questions:

- Are *please*-requests structurally specific in PSLs in Cameroon and Kenya?
- Are these request forms unique in any way to Cameroon and Kenya?
- Does *please* serve any other function in PSLs in Cameroon and Kenya?

3.1 General distribution

Corpus	Internal modification				External modification	Others	Total
	lexical			conditional	syntactic		
	<i>please</i>	name/ kinship term	modifier word	<i>condition</i> ("if")	<i>reason</i>		
CCE	99 (49.3%)	15 (7.5%)	10 (5.0%)	17 (8.4%)	21 (10.4)	39 (19.4%)	201 (100.0%)
ICE-EA	28 (60.9%)	- (0.0%)	- (0.0%)	6 (13.0%)	5 (10.9%)	7 (15.2%)	46 (100.0%)

Table 1: Modifying elements of *please*-requests in CCE and ICE-EA

The statistics indicate a high frequency of *please*-related requests in Cameroonian letter-writing (201 tokens in 88,632 words), compared to that of the Kenyans (46 tokens in 22,300 words). In fact, Wichmann (2002: 8) found only 120 tokens of *please* in 400,000 words of written texts in ICE-GB (Great Britain), and as few as 88 tokens in 600,000 words of the spoken part of the corpus. This leaves one with the conclusion that *please*-related request is entrenched in Cameroonian PSLs. Three reasons may account for this. First, it appears to be a legacy of colonial times, when school children were taught to use "*please sir*" to request permission from the teacher or as a requirement to ask questions. Second, since the school teacher is still held in high esteem, especially in rural areas in Cameroon/Kenya and probably elsewhere in Africa, *please* has not really lost its place in children's linguistic repertoire even when they become adults. The third point may be related to general language-learning strategies: a tendency for learners of English at an early stage to memorize phrases from the target language and later to try to reproduce them, irrespective of the linguistic and pragmatic context (see Schmied 1991: 52, on reasons for African forms in English). Some of these points will further be discussed in the subsequent sections.

4 Discussion

4.1 Internal modification

Please

Although a request with *please* is more frequent in the Cameroonian material than in the Kenyan material, it is the most frequent type of request in the context of letter writing. These are central cases because *please* signals that the proposition is a request, although not in all cases. Examples (2) – (5) illustrate this.

- (2) e taught. Female3 is not always in school due to health problems and she has been missing many tests. Please continue to remember me in your prayers. This term is a difficult one for me. My test papers have... (Pl017.txt/CCE)
- (3) <#>don't know who will help to compensate me. <#>Greet your friends. <#>Nice <#>tyme. <#>Please reply I look forward waiting for your decision <#>I met my <slang>sisy <name> at Keria. <#>When... (SL.txt/CCE)
- (4) honest with me. <#>Well, I think you heard me complain that you're becoming so cold nowadays. <#>Please, Please, I'm begging tell me what you think about the future <slang>coz for one am beginning to l ... (SL.txt/ICE-EA)
- (5) Il take place? We are anxiously waiting to see you; at least when you finish the results. Can you please check if you can find my book Language Planning and Language Education by "P Chris Kennedy"? Exte... (Pl30.txt/CCE)

These examples can be placed into two main categories according to the terminology of Brown and Levinson (1987: 68-70): "on record without redress" (direct request), examples (2) – (4) and "on record with redress" (conventionally indirect), example (5). The Kenyan examples are without redress (i.e. direct), and example (4) is the only case where the writer appears to want to save face by using double *please*. This face saving strategy is conventionalized in the Cameroonian example (5), where the request is indirect. There are seven of them in this category of *please*-requests. In relative terms, there is a greater tendency at indirectness in the CCE. A felicity condition for indirect request with *please* is the presence of a modal. Of the seven examples, five involve *can*, and two involve *will*:

- (6) rted in "P Kenya" by other people and seemed to have failed. If you travel to "P Bamenda", will you please get some leaflets from the bank and some memoranda or policy documents from any divisional head ser (PL006.txt/CCE)

While the examples with *can* (as in (5) above) are perfectly in line with the context of request (because it refers to the ability of the hearer to act or comply in certain ways), example (6) with *will* seems not. Wichmann (2000: 12) reports eight cases of *can* in the same context and one for *could*, and notes that where *could* occurs with *please*-request, it does so in the public and not private texts.

Name/kinship term and another modifier

Many instances of *please*-request in the CCE are modified by a name (e.g. Female1, Male1, etc., refer to proper names)², a kinship term such as a title and another modifying word e.g. *kindly* and *just*. These forms of modification do not occur in ICE-EA. The following examples are used for illustration.

- (7) sion. So you were in “P Akum” and could not look for me and had only to leave a week ago. Female1, please if you can tell uncle Male2 to make me a bed I will be very happy tell him I could not send him advance.... (PL065.txt/CCE)
- (8) ng that might be you didn’t see anybody reliable to send that dress. Now that Doctor will be around please male1, endeavour to send the black coat with brown hands and its tousesers [sic] as you did promise. You know (PL247.txt/CCE)
- (9) his co-workers of the House of Justice. Really this is a thing I have always been timid to attempt. Please, Counsellor is it possible to write to these people as individuals expressing one’s love. Does it ... (PL163.txt/CCE)
- (10) eve God has a plan for every body. I hope you understand that well. I hope you are really enjoying. Please kindly buy us “collands”, I hope you know what it means. It is the thing that girls use in dancing bal... (PL137.txt/CCE)
- (11) bition. See you on the morning of the brother of tomorrow. Hope to sip some hot coffee soon. Amen. Please just pardon me for the rather poor quality paper I have now resorted to. “C’est la crise qui me frappe” (PL170.txt/CCE)

The first two examples (7-8) involve real names of the persons to whom the request is addressed. Example (9) mentions the addressee by title and in the last two examples *please* is modified by *kindly* and *just*. These examples serve the purpose of polite request, but they can also be seen as an attempt to create a ‘phatic’ bond (cf. Laver 1975) between the writer and the addressee, esp. when the addressee’s name is mentioned. This adds a cultural dimension to the speech act of requesting in letter-writing in Cameroon. Further, to the extent that *kindly* and *just* share some functions with *please* (Stubbs 1983), the co-occurrence of *please* in examples (10) and (11) with *kindly* and *just* may be seen as an attempt to appear more polite.

Conditional with *If*

There are many instances where *please*-requests in the two corpora are modified with *if*, signalling a condition which the writer predicates his/her request on. These account for 8.4 per cent of the occurrences in the CCE and 13 per cent in ICE-EA. Some examples include:

- (12) 15 grateful if you would volunteer to assist them. You can contact Male1 at 39: 07: 91 after 6 or 7 pm. Please if you have the opportunity to call please do so, I really want to talk to you. Best time to call would be Monday evenings say 6 a.m (PL020.txt/CCE)
- (13) Thanks much for your sincere help to me. If you can have a way out, you adjust my attestation to suit the purpose of it. If not, God is the Father of orphans and I hope I will succeed. I am Female 1, brother if you have any one to help me please give him my names. Say hello to the whole family. (PL165.txt)
- (14) am completely in your skin. <#/>So confused I don't know what to do! <#/>If you are EVER TO SAY NO! please kill me first. <#/>Your future is my future your present is my present and forgotten is our past fo (SL.txt/ICE-EA)
- (15) to see her there. <#/>What is her arrangement with her father? <#/>Has she got anything to do? <#/>Please, son, if you get some money help your brother <name/> because when he left here I gave him only thr (SL.txt/ICE-EA)

These are indirect requests because they have more than one meaning or illocutionary force (see Searle 1975). Although on the surface level there seems to be conditions attached to the actions the addressee is being asked to perform, the pragmatic interpretation is different. For example, in (12) the writer wants the addressee to call him/her and not to wait for an opportunity to do so. This interpretation derives from clause *I really want to talk to you*. In (13) the writer first of all thanks the addressee for the help he/she (addressee) has obviously indicated would be extended to him/her (writer), and later on bases a request for his/her name to be given to the right places, on a condition. This is an act of humble indirect request. In (14) the meaning is not that the writer truly believes the addressee could contemplate murder under any circumstances; but that he (the addressee) should 'never say n'. And (15) is request from a parent to the son to assist a brother financially. The preconditions underlying the performance of the directive illocutionary acts (see Haverkate 1988) or requests in these examples seem to be an important pragmalinguistic strategy in a culture where gratitude is a cultural practice, esp. when assistance in any form is given and/or is anticipated.

4.2 External modification

Reason as modification strategy

About ten per cent of *please*-requests in the CCE and ICE-EA use *reason* or ‘grounders’ (House & Kasper 1987) as a major external modification strategy as in (16)-(19). (The underlined portions are the justifications or reasons for the requests.)

- (16) know if you are still interested in coming here. My older brother will be coming here in November, so please give him a letter to give to me. Take care of yourself and keep in touch. For fear that you might n (PL1022.txt/CCE)
- (17) graduation which comes up sometimes in August or September. Whatever thing you do with this matter, please be cautious and tactful because I don’t want somebody to indulge her emotions for a thing that may not work (PL039.txt/CCE)
- (18) our being together is long overdue <name/> you are my heart, my life, anything I do it is yours so please I beg don’t break my heart at any moment. <#/>Don’t <-/display> my life a <-/pleach> My life depends (SL.txt/ICE-EA)
- (19) help you to finish your college well and prosper for better life. <#/>Goodbye till we meet. <#/>But please reply so that I will be able to know more about that plan. </I> W1B-SK18 <I><#/> My Darling Bro, <# (SL.txt/ICE-EA)

This use of grounders has been reported to be the main supportive move on requests by adults L2 users, as well as among native speakers (cf. House & Kasper 1987, Faerch & Kasper 1989, Trosborg 1995, Fukushima 1996). And specifically, Faerch and Kasper have argued that L2 learners tend to prefer external over internal modifiers because the former are more explicit in their politeness function. The evidence in this present study, however, is that letter-writers in Cameroon and Kenya seem to prefer internal modification strategies (cf. Table 1). This preference for internal supportive strategies (lexical) lends credence to the contention that superfluity (which is partly borne out of the desire for emphasis; but with no proper pragmalinguistic competence to express it) appears to characterize *please*-requests, esp. in the Cameroonian data. For one thing, internal modifiers are primarily modality markers which contribute minimal propositional meaning to the request (cf. Kasper 1982). On the other hand, it may well be an entrenched stylistic feature which is cultural-specific, since similar devices have been reported in the writing of dissertation acknowledgements, job applications and students’ complaint letters in Cameroon (see Nkemleke 2004, 2006).

4.3 Others

In this category *please* does not seem to be used as a request, but as a discourse facilitator as illustrated by the following examples:

- (20) Well is almost a year since we knew each other so closely. I am sure you have gained enough from me as far as sexual satisfaction is concerned. Not only that the fringe benefits that are accrue. Please I need not recount. I feel this is the moment for you to show your greatest concern for me (PL155.txt/CCE)
- (21) Its once more a great pleasure writing to you. How are you doing as concerned health? Hoping fine. Please thanks for my stamp and pain taking to type. (PL158.txt/CCE)
- (22) communicate with our friends. It is through this way that we learn a lot of things. Please stay well. Bye. Female1 (PL161.txt/CCE)
- (23) . <#>I look forward to hearing from you soon. <#>bye! <#>-_Forbid<+_Forgive> flaws <-iff> any please! <#>Yours' Sincerely, </I> W1B-SK22 <I><O> <#>dear <name/> it was a place which I can't identi (SL.txt)
- (24) e/> <#>If you <-_dont><+_don't> want to write my name address this way <#>It will reach me safely Please. </I> W1B-SK12 <I> <#>Dear <name/> <#>Well, let me start by extending my special regard to you ov (SL.txt/ICE-EA)
- (25) why had I to put you in such a state. <#>I know I was about to 'strip' you or <-/may be> I did but Please Brother can't you understand that I'm just a loyal <-/descendant> of 'EVE'? <#>And no 'ADAM' was wi (SL.txt/ICE-EA)

The function of *please* in these examples is in line with the observation by Biber et al. (1999: 140) that *please* operates to 'facilitate the on-going interaction' and that it contributes to the expression of politeness, emotion and attitude (ibid.: 1047). Whereas the observation by Biber et al. is made on the basis of face-to-face interaction in spoken discourse, and is in line with the claim by House (1989) that *please* co-occur only with certain kinds of requests, such as occur in standard situations (i.e. service encounters), the examples in my data are from a written, though informal text type. Presumably, this is an extension (in an African context) of the regular function of *please* beyond service encounters in interactional discourse, where the right to ask for something and the obligation to give it is inherent in the event.

5 Conclusion

My analysis of data reveals two broad patterns of the use of *please* in PSLs in Cameroon and Kenya. The first involves the use of *please* together with other modifying elements (e.g. *please* + *kindly*; *please* + *just*; *please* + an NP (i.e. kinship word/title) to mark politeness. In this same category one finds a general tendency to propositional explicitness, making a request for example, with double use of the word *please*. These strategies suggest perhaps a primary concern by the writers for clarity – for making sure they are understood in a language over which they are not sure of very good control. Again the use of extended modifiers here may also be due to a penchant on the part of the writers to express respect to their addressees, having found the use of *please* alone insufficient to convey such sentiments. (Schmied 1991: 90ff also situates this within the context of politeness as a cherished commodity in African culture.) The second pattern involves the use of *please* in essentially what Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to as discernment politeness, that is, politeness marker (*please*) used irrespective of communicative goal. In these instances it is evident that writers have an underlying cognitive awareness of the need to maintain face in making requests. However, competence over control of this knowledge with respect to register and writing conventions seems to be lacking. In those cases, the conventional meaning and use of *please* is rather overstretched, though it can be readily understood that the writers desire to show deference and/or politeness.

Both instances seem to demonstrate that Cameroonian and Kenyan private letter writers seem to have clear choices and strategies of their own on how to formulate requests in letter writing. These choices/strategies could be summarized essentially as the over-use of the form and function of *please* esp. in Cameroon. The motivation for this seems to be both cultural and pedagogic. From the cultural perspective, social distance in the Cameroonian/Kenyan (and in other African communities) society is clearly demarcated according to age groups and between those who are socially/economically well-off and those who are not. It is also increasingly evident in the administration. In terms of language use, this implies that words and expressions are carefully chosen to please and show deference. From the pedagogic view, it could be attributed to the process of language acquisition, where from their early encounter with English, learners are not exposed to all contextual co-ordinates governing the use of *please*, both in writing and in speech. Over-use of *please* in PSLs, which in many ways appears to be a transfer of conversational features into writing can, therefore, be seen to be the result of this apparent instructional gap.

Private (social) letters appear to constitute an interesting text type on which to study the speech act of requesting involving *please* in Cameroon and Kenya.

However, a broader view of the performance of this speech act in both spoken and written texts is desired, before definite statements can be made. For example, it may be of interest to investigate how *please* combines with other strategies to perform requestive acts in spoken discourse, and contrasts findings here with those from written letters.

Notes

- ¹ I wish to thank the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for sponsoring my research stay in Chemnitz.
- ² In compiling the Cameroonian corpus, a decision was taken to identify females with F and males with M in private letters, for confidentiality. Consequently, F1, F2, M1, M2 etc. refer to different male and female names mentioned in the letters.

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