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PLEASE: A POLITENESS FORMULA VIEWED IN A TRANSLATION PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

Many languages have a marker of politeness such as *please* associated with the making of a request (e.g. German *bitte*, French *s'il vous plaît*). Swedish on the other hand does not have a routinised politeness marker corresponding to *please*. The present paper studies the correspondences of *please* in Swedish in order to get a closer picture of its different functions in English and its translation correspondences. It is shown on the basis of translations that *please* is used both as a standardised strategy in social situations and as a way of avoiding conflict by being tactful. When *please* is associated with social politeness it is translated by *var så god*. The tactful or strategic *please* signals intensity, emphasis and power and has emotional side-effects. It is never translated as *var så god*. It is shown that the functions of *please* depend both on the social situation and on the patterns where it occurs (e.g. position in the utterance and the grammatical context).

Key words

Social politeness; illocutionary force; pragmatic marker; contrastive; parallel corpus; tact

1. Introduction

The little word *please* has recently attracted considerable interest (House 1989, Fraser 1996, Wichmann 2004, Sato 2008).¹ According to Fraser (1996), *please* is a pragmatic idiom signalling illocutionary force: “[w]hen *please* occurs before an imperative structure, it signals that the speaker intends the utterance to be taken as a request, and only as a request” (Fraser 1996: 174). In addition to (illocutionary) force it has been suggested that *please* marks politeness. According to Wich-

mann (2004: 1524) “the word *please* in contemporary usage is [...] undeniably associated very closely with being ‘polite’”. We can conclude that *please* occurs ‘with a varying degree of politeness and directive force’ (Sato 2008: 1250).

A cross-linguistic analysis based on the comparison between English and Swedish will be the starting-point for discussing the politeness and illocutionary force expressed by *please*. Translations can focus on the illocutionary force associated with *please* or on its use as a politeness marker depending on different linguistic and non-linguistic features present in the speech situation.

Many languages have a marker such as *please* associated with requests (especially the imperative) and with politeness (e.g. German *bitte*, French *s’il vous plaît*). Swedish differs from German or French in that it does not have a routinised politeness or force marker corresponding to *please*. Ohlander (1985) refers to ‘the chronic shortage’ of a universal politeness marker in Swedish of the same type which is found in English and in many other languages. The rules of usage may also be different. For example, German speakers use *bitte* more frequently than English speakers use *please* in everyday request situations (House 1989: 97).

There is no direct correspondence of *please* in Swedish. However we can look at its translations into Swedish (as well as looking back at the Swedish sources when *please* is used in English translations). Translators have to make decisions about what *please* means on the basis of analysing its functions in the source language. Their decisions are based on the relationship between the speaker and hearer, degree of formality and the extent to which the situation has become routinised.

The outline of the paper is as follows. The distribution of the correspondences in the material will be discussed in Section 2. Section 3 deals with the functions of *please* on the basis of the translations. The conclusion in Section 4 discusses the two types of politeness signalled by *please*.

2. Material

We can study the ways in which *please* is translated on the basis of the English-Swedish Parallel corpus (ESPC) (Altenberg and Aijmer 2000). The corpus consists of roughly 3 million words of English texts translated into Swedish and a similar amount of Swedish texts with English correspondences. Both fiction and non-fiction texts have been collected in roughly the same proportions (40 texts each of 10,000–15,000 words).

Translations will be the raw material for the discussion of *please* and politeness. The direct confrontation involved in translating from one language to another makes it possible to establish (translation) paradigms displaying the ways in which a particular element has been translated. Table 1 shows the paradigm resulting from extracting the translations of *please* in the ESPC.

The examples of *please* in the English originals can be assumed to be representative of how the word is used in English although the examples are few.

There were 65 examples of *please* in English original texts, eight of which were examples of the verb *please* (including one example of *if you please*) and therefore not counted. In order to study the polite *please* I have used only fiction texts. The examples can be taken to represent natural speech since all (except three) examples occur in direct quotations. The fictional characters have different speaker and hearer roles (involving more or less power) and several types of social situations and scenarios are represented.

Table 1. Swedish translations of *please* in fiction texts in the ESPC (English originals → Swedish translations)

(<i>Åh</i>) <i>snälla</i> (X) with the variants <i>var snäll och</i> , <i>snälla du/ni</i> , <i>är ni snäll</i> ; <i>kära</i> (oh dear (X), be so kind and, dear you, are you kind, dear)	29
<i>Ja tack</i> (<i>gärna</i>) with the variant <i>gärna</i> (yes thank you willingly)	4
<i>Var vänlig och</i> with the variants <i>var bussig och</i> , <i>är ni hyggliga</i> (be kind (and), are you kind)	5
<i>Kan kanske</i> (perhaps)	1
<i>Så ska ni få höra</i> , <i>säger jag</i> (I say, listen to this)	1
<i>Var så god</i> with the variant <i>var god</i> ‘be so good and’, ‘be good’	2
Ø	10
Other	5

A comment on the translations:

Swedish has no politeness marker corresponding to (all the functions of) English *please*. As a result there is not a single translation correspondence.

The translations can be distinguished by their different meanings although this is not clear from the meaning of the adjectives used (*snäll*, *vänlig*, *god*). The following invented examples (translations of *please sit down*) have different meanings depending on several different factors such as the authority of the speaker and whether the situation is regarded as routinised or negotiated by the speaker and hearer.

- a. *Var snäll och sätt dig* (I urge you to sit down)
- b. *Var så god och sitt ner* (do sit down)

We can also change the translation direction and study *please* in translations from Swedish. Table 2 shows the words and constructions in the Swedish source texts. If *please* is translated by a construction with *snäll(a)* (*var snäll och*), *vänlig* (*var vänlig och*), or *var så god* we would expect these constructions to be the source of *please* in the Swedish original texts. This is indeed the case. The translator has

also used *please* when the Swedish original explicitly marks illocutionary force (*jag ber dig* ‘I ask you’).

Table 2. *Please* in English translations of Swedish originals in fiction texts in ESPC (Swedish originals → English translations)

<i>Please</i> added with no correspondence in the source text	16
<i>Snälla</i> (including <i>snälla snälla</i> counted as one example)	3
<i>Var så god(a)</i> with the variant <i>var god(a)</i> ‘be (so) good’	3
<i>Vill du</i> (will you)	2
<i>Gärna</i> with variant <i>för all del</i> ‘willingly’, ‘by all means’ – only as a response	2
<i>Vill ni vara så vänliga och</i> with the variant <i>vill du vara vänlig och</i> ‘will you be (so) kind and’	2
<i>Det går bra att</i> (‘it goes well to’)	1
<i>Så ber jag dig</i> (‘so ask I you’)	1
<i>Jag vill att</i> (‘I will that’)	1
<i>Säger jag</i> (‘I say’)	1

The frequencies of the correspondences should also be noted. Johansson (2007: 32) mentions *please* as an example of a word which does not have a straightforward counterpart in Norwegian and is therefore underused in translations from Norwegian. We find a similar imbalance when we compare the distribution of *please* in English originals and English translations in the ESPC. A comparison between Table 1 and Table 2 shows that *snälla* is used less frequently in Swedish originals than in the translation. (29 examples in translations, 3 examples in Swedish originals).

Moreover *please* has been added in a large number of examples (i.e. the opposite of omission in translations from original texts). Addition (like omission) is interesting from a typological or cross-linguistic perspective.

Addition can be interpreted as the translator’s response to the whole context, reflecting cross-linguistic differences in the sort of meanings that are conventionally expressed in natural discourse. (Johansson 2007: 26)

The reason for the addition of *please* in ‘back-translations’ may be that formulaic politeness markers are needed in some situations in English when they are not needed in Swedish.

The translations are interesting because they give an indication of when politeness is purely formal and when it is used strategically to avoid conflict. They also indicate that *please* is not only a politeness marker but a marker of illocutionary force linked to the speaker’s authority. The patterns with *please* will be further analysed in Section 3.

3. Analysing patterns with *please*

Please occurs with imperatives and with indirect requests. There were 12 different patterns shown in the table below:

Table 3. *Please* in different patterns in English original texts

<i>Please</i> + Imperative	26
Imperative + <i>please</i>	3
<i>Could you please</i>	1
<i>Could I ... please</i>	1
<i>Please would NP VP</i>	1
<i>Please will you</i>	1
<i>Would NP VP please</i>	1
<i>Please</i> + wh question	1
Wh-question + <i>please</i>	1
NAME + <i>please</i>	2
<i>Yes please</i>	2
<i>Please</i>	1

Please can be placed initially, finally and medially (or alone) which explains the large number of patterns. We can see that although many patterns are represented, the pattern ‘please + imperative’ is dominant. 26 out of 57 examples occurred with an imperative (29 out of 57 examples if the pattern ‘imperative + *please*’ is included). This is similar to the high figures found by Sato² (2008) for American and New Zealand English (cf. also Aijmer 1996 who found that *please* was more frequent with imperatives than with indirect requests in the London-Lund Corpus). Indirect requests in the form of a question included *could you*, *could I* (ability), *would NP*, *will you* (willingness), (so-called query-preparatory requests). The pattern *yes please* is restricted to formulaic responses to offers.

Please was rarely used with indirect requests. However many examples from non-fiction (not part of the study) have an indirect form *will you please*, *would you please*, *could you please* which suggests that stylistic differences such as degree of formality are involved. In the rest of the paper I will use translations to unpack the functions of *please*.

3.1. Please and imperatives

Please tends to be neglected as a linguistic item because it is above all associated with social behaviour. It is formulaic and is used in social situations “characterized by routine and recurrence” (Aijmer 1996). A clear example of a social situation where the polite ‘please’ is expected is in the response to an offer. People are

expected to say *yes please* (or *yes thank you*) when they are offered something because it is socially appropriate.

Social politeness is rooted in people's needs for smoothly organized interaction with other members of the group. As member of groups, people must behave in more or less predictable ways in order to achieve social coordination and sustain communication. One way of doing this is to follow conventional or social politeness. (Janney and Arndt 2005: 22–23)

Other recurrent social situations are for instance asking someone to sit down, to come in, to have something more to eat, to wait on the telephone, etc. In recurrent social situations *please* has little meaning although its absence might be noticed and associated with sanctions.

The translations of *please* preceded or followed by an imperative show that there are several different uses of *please*. To express social conventionalized politeness the translator has used *var så god*.

- (1) “You’re letting the cold in.”
Listen to how his wife spoke to him.
No respect.
Diana smiled and said, “Please come in.”
Normally, nothing would have induced Wilf to leave the doorstep and enter a house full of Hell Close women, but he had to see Diana, listen to her lovely voice.
(ST1)³

“Du släpper in kylan.”
Hör bara hur hans fru talade till honom.
Ingen respekt.
Diana log och sa: “Var så god och stig in.”
I vanliga fall skulle ingenting ha kunnat få Wilf att lämna trappan och gå in i ett hus fullt av kvinnor från Lusgränd, men han måste se Diana, lyssna till hennes underbart vackra röst.

Other situations where *please* corresponds to ‘var så god(a) och’ are (2) ‘asking someone to sit down’ and (3) asking someone to (sit down and) have a bun.

- (2) Wallander was surprised by the man’s forthright statement.
“Let’s start from the beginning,” he said.
“Please sit down.”
I’m afraid the chair’s a bit old.
(HM2T)

Wallander blev överraskad av mannens direkthet.

- Vi får ta det hela från början, sa han.

Var så god och sitt.

Tyvänn är stolen dålig.

- (3) “They’ve no sense of humour,” said Igor.
 “May I have a bun?”
 “Yes, of course, please do, and please do take a seat,” said Elsa.
 “I’ll just go and fetch the coffee.”
 (ARP1T)

— Dom har ingen humor, sa Igor.

Får man ta en bulle?

— Ja varsågod och slå er ner, sa Elsa.

Jag ska hämta kaffepannan.

Var så god is the only conventionalized politeness marker in Swedish.⁴ The translation shows if the translator has regarded politeness as purely conventional or as more strategic. In (4) the choice of an indirect request in the translation suggests that the speaker considers the hearer’s face needs:

- (4) But at that moment the mirrored door at the rear of the shop opened and Louis Zablonky came out. He was a short, wizened man of fifty-six, but looked older.
 “Mr James,” he beamed, “how nice to see you.”
Please come into my office.
 “How have you been keeping?”
 (FF1)

Men i det ögonblicket öppnades den spegelklädda dörren längst in i affären, och Louis Zablonky kom ut. Han var en kortväxt och skrumpen femtiosexåring, men han såg äldre ut.

“Mr James,” sa han och log brett, “så trevligt att se er igen.

Vill ni inte stiga in på mitt kontor?

Hur har ni haft det?”

(literally: will you not step into my office)

In the following example the translator has added *please* going from the Swedish source text to the English target. *Please* is enforced by the social situation and social rules for what is appropriate. The absence of a correspondence in Swedish reflects the fact that Swedish does not need to use a politeness marker:

- (5) “Can’t you say who it is you want to talk to?”
 “No, no, that’s not necessary... please excuse me.”

It sounded as if the receiver had been put down.
(MG1T)

— Kan du inte säga vem du vill tala med?
— Nej nej, det behövs inte... ursäkta mej.
Här lät det som om luren lades på.

As has been observed by Ohlander (1985) *var så god och* and *var vänlig och* (*var snäll och*) are quite different as translations. Using Sato's (2008) terms we can refer to *var så god* as 'submissive' and *var snäll och* (and variants) as volitional or intentional. The politely submissive variant has become associated with social appropriateness (in Swedish) rather than *var snäll och* which is used for strategic politeness or 'being tactful'. *Var snäll och* expresses the speaker's involvement and assertiveness:

- (6) Miss Honey looked carefully at the tiny girl with dark hair and a round serious face sitting in the second row.
"Wonderful," she said.
"Please stand up and recite as much of it as you can."
Matilda stood up and began to say the two-times table.
(RD1)

Fröken Honung betraktade ingående den lilla flickan med det mörka håret och det runda allvarliga ansiktet som satt i andra raden.
"Vad bra!" sa hon.
"Var snäll och res dig upp och läs upp tvåans tabell så långt du kan."
Matilda reste sig upp och började rabbla tvåans tabell.
(RD1T)

Please in the volitional meaning can be impolite and brusque even when politeness is signalled: "The speaker manipulates the recipient's knowledge of *please* as a courtesy token, thereby using politeness as a warrant for delivering the assertive act" (Sato 2008: 1273–1274). When *please* is used strategically it can be associated with power and authority. In (6) 'Miss Honey' is in a position of authority or power in relation to the 'tiny girl with dark hair' because of the teaching situation. Authority and power with implications such as urgency or insistence, impoliteness, annoyance are suggested by the translations.

Urgency can be suggested by the translator's *glöm inte* ('don't forget'):

- (7) "Please let old Victor know our troubles.
He can't fix what he doesn't know.
And — please — wish Victor Happy Birthday from us all."
(JC1)

“Ni kan väl tala med Victor om saken är ni snäll.
Han kan ju inte göra något åt det om han inte får reda på det.
Och glöm inte att gratulera honom från oss alla!”

Irritation and impatience are expressed by the translation in (8):

(8) “If there’s any way I can help with that, just let me — ”

“Andrew!

Please be serious.”

“Can’t.”

(AH1)

“Om jag kan hjälpa dig med det på något sätt, är det bara att säga till...”

“Andrew!

Försök vara allvarlig.”

“Det går inte.”

Lit. ‘Try to be serious’

Please is assertive, involved and emotional. The translator has used *försök(a)* ‘try’ which suggests that the hearer does not want to make an effort. *Please* in the example above is associated with ‘being tactful’ (Janney and Arndt 2005), i.e. with a more strategic use of politeness in communication. “The speaker does not only behave in a socially appropriate way but uses *please* strategically to avoid conflicts and to establish positive social relations”. Translating *please* involves more than simply looking for a correspondence in the other language. The translator has to consider who the speaker is, the social goal as well as intended or non-intended effects in order to choose the appropriate translation. As shown by the example above ‘the tactful’ *please* can also be impolite when it displays emotion.

The translation can also render the illocutionary force associated with *please*. *Please* is used to make a strong demand as suggested by the translation *jag måste be er* ‘I must ask you’ (not to do something).

(9) “How can you call it customer service when you don’t do shit?”

Her mouth turned prim.

“Please don’t use language like that around me.

It’s very offensive.”

(SG1)

“Hur kan ni kalla det kundtjänst när ni inte hjälper till med ett skit?”

Hennes mun drogs till en pryd grimas.

“Jag måste be er att inte använda sådant språk.

Det är mycket obehagligt.”

Lit. ‘I have to ask you’

Please expresses both illocutionary force and (im)politeness as shown by the translations. In (10) the translator has chosen *säger jag* (I say this) to emphasise that the speaker will not tolerate a refusal:

- (10) Please order a taxi.
(MS1T)
Vill du beställa en taxi, säger jag

A ‘strong’, authoritative request needs to be distinguished from an appeal (a persuasive demand or a plea). In (11) the speaker uses the appealing *please* because the hearer is unwilling to comply with the speaker’s wishes. The translator has chosen the vocative *snälla du* (‘kind you’, ‘dear’) to render appeal.

- (11) “I don’t think I want to say it, Miss Honey.”
“Please tell it,” Miss Honey said.
“I promise I won’t mind.”
(RD1)
- “Jag tror inte att jag vill läsa upp den, fröken Honung.”
“Snälla du, gör det,” sa fröken Honung.
“Jag lovar att inte bli förnärad.”

3.2. Translations of indirect requests

An indirect request pays attention to the social relationship with the hearer (strategically tactful behaviour). *Please* was never translated as *snälla* suggesting that *please* is not used for appeal in this context. *Could you please* and *Could I ... please* are used for requests and not for questioning. *Please* is therefore primarily a request marker.

- (12) Celia started to say, “Do we have time?” but was unable to finish because Andrew was kissing her.
Moments later, he murmured, “Could you please clear that bed?”
Reaching behind, without looking and with one arm around Andrew, Celia began to throw clothes on the floor.
(AH1)

Celia började säga: “Hinner vi?” men hon kunde inte avsluta meningen eftersom Andrew kysste henne.

Några ögonblick senare mumlade han: “Kan du ta bort de där sakerna från sängen?”

Hon sträckte handen bakåt utan att se sig om och med andra armen runt Andrew, och började slänga ner kläderna på golvet.

Kan kanske ('can perhaps') suggests that *please* can in addition be used as a mitigating politeness marker:

- (13) "Wonderful," Macon said.
He cleared his throat.
"So could I have him back, please?"
(AT1)
- "Underbart," sade Macon.
Han harklade sig.
"Då kan jag kanske få honom tillbaka."

3.3. Translation of elliptical forms

Please with elliptical forms is only found in recurrent social situations, for example to ask a person to wait on the telephone or to ask for a drink at a restaurant. *Please* is used as a force idiom which need not be translated since the (institutionalised) context makes it clear that a request is made.

- (14) "Yes, that's me."
"One moment, please.
I have a call for you from the village of Frankenstein."
(ARP1T)
- Ja, det är jag!
— Ett ögonblick.
Det kommer samtal från byn Frankenstein.

In (15) the translator's choice of the imperative conveys the requestive function:

- (15) Oh dear, I think I caught a chill sitting there watching out for hares.
Innkeeper, a glass of mulled wine, please.
(ARP1T)
Oj, jag tror jag blev kall när jag satt och lurade på haren — Krögare, ge mej ett glas varm glögg!

3.4. Translations of the pattern (yes) please

Yes please occurs in the response to an offer with a softening function. The translation (*ja tack* 'yes thank you') indicates the close similarity between *please* and thanking. *Gärna* expresses the hearer's willingness to accept the offer (*gärna* 'willingly').

- (16) “That never occurred to me.
More champagne?”
“Yes, please.”
(AH1)

“Det har jag aldrig tänkt på.
Mer champagne?”
“Ja tack.”

3.5. Translations of freestanding *please*

When *please* occurs alone it can be preceded by *oh*, it can be repeated, and accompanied by a name referring to the person addressed. *Please* in this function has been described as an attention-getter (Sato 2008). Its main function is to influence another individual’s behaviour. In the example below it expresses the speaker’s desperation:

- (17) Not from excitement, but from anxiety that she wouldn’t be able to find the right words of praise when she finally got the wrappings off and opened the box.
She didn’t pray to God, because she hadn’t heard about him yet, but she repeated over and over again to herself:
“Please, please, I must be pleased, I must be pleased... pleased.”
(MR1T)

Inte av spänning utan av ängslan för att hon inte skulle kunna finna de rätta glad-orden, när hon äntligen hade lyckats få av höljet och öppnat asken.

Hon bad inte till Gud, för hon hade inte hört talas om honom utan upprepade tyst för sig själv.

— Snälla, snälla, jag måste bli glad... jag måste bli glad... glad.

Please does not have a mitigating or illocutionary force function but is strongly emotional (as indicated by *snälla*).

4. Conclusion

Please is both a structurally and functionally flexible element as shown by the many patterns in which it occurs. Sato (2008) has for instance shown that *please* has different functions depending on its position in the utterance. Another important factor is the type of sentence pattern (e.g. whether *please* occurs with an imperative or an indirect requestive form). The close analysis of the correspon-

dences of *please* suggests that politeness can be realized in different ways. The use of *please* is regulated by ‘politeness conventions’ providing a ‘framework of standardised strategies for getting gracefully into, and back out of, a recurring social situation’ (Janney and Arndt 2005: 23). This is social politeness illustrated in the Swedish translation ‘var så god’. *Please* can be idiomatic but it can also be used strategically in a number of ways including being impolite in a polite way. This type of politeness has been described by Brown and Levinson (1987) and also by Janney and Arndt (2005) who speak about ‘tact’ rather than face-saving. Tact is not governed by social conventions but involves the strategic calculation of how conflict can be avoided. “Being tactful is not simply a matter of behaving in a socially ‘correct’ way – i.e., following rules of social usage; rather it is a matter of behaving in an interpersonally supportive way” (Janney and Arndt 2005: 23). Examples of conflict-avoiding strategies are for instance indirect forms rather than direct ones, clustering of polite ‘mitigating’ features, a special prosody, repetition, use of names, etc.

The distinction between *please* as a conventionalised politeness marker in recurrent situations and *please* imposing on the hearer to do something is supported by translations. Swedish *var så god* signals empty or social politeness in recurrent social situations. It cannot be replaced by *var snäll och* (or a variant) which is assertive or brusque rather than polite. On the other hand, *var snäll och* can signal intensity, emphasis and power and has side-effects such as impatience and urgency (strategic or volitional tactful behaviour). The use of *please* to make persuasive appeals is at the most volitional end of tactful uses (indicated by translations such as *snälla du/ni*, *snälla + name*).

Notes

- 1 For an overview of the extensive literature on *please* see Sato (2008).
- 2 40 out of 100 examples (AmE) and 34 out of 100 examples (NZE).
- 3 ST refers to the name of the author (Sue Townsend).
- 4 However Ohlander (1985) shows that there are examples in presentday colloquial Swedish where *snälla* has become a routinised politeness marker (without any meaning of ‘appeal’).

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