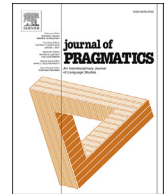


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Towards a social syntax

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a new approach to the interface between linguistic form and speech acts. The basic idea is to rethink prevailing canonicity assumptions about the inventory of syntactic forms used to perform speech acts. I argue for a new concept of canonicity in that domain, which is based on the following claim: pragmatically unmarked versions of the major speech acts requests, questions, and assertions comply with the socio-pragmatic principle of 'maximize politeness'. According to this principle, speakers try to minimize the risk of failure in achieving the relevant illocutionary goals of individual speech acts, and they can minimize that risk by using unambiguous linguistic forms that express politeness. I illustrate this account for unmarked forms of requests, questions, and assertions in German because in this language, the pragmatically unmarked versions of each of those speech acts can be signaled by dedicated particle elements (*bitte* 'please' in requests; *denn* 'then' in questions; and *ja* 'yes' in assertions). I claim that these particles are an overt realization of a syntactic head of a functional projection that encodes socio-pragmatic meaning in the left periphery of the clause. The paper sketches a unified syntactic analysis that holds across speech acts and that can potentially be extended to further phenomena of politeness marking in natural language.

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1. Introduction

The concept of unmarked or 'canonical' syntactic forms for some of the major speech acts is at the core of any theory in speech act syntax. The canonicity assumption is already present in Searle's (1969: 22) classical work when he pointed out the propositional parallelism vis-à-vis differences in illocutionary force between the following syntactic forms:

- (1) a. Sam smokes habitually.
- b. Does Sam smoke habitually?
- c. Sam smoke habitually!

One could thus think that different word orders and morphosyntactic forms correspond to different speech acts, and the linguistic forms in (1) are the canonical versions of that correspondence. This view is too simplistic, and many decades of linguistic research have shown that the picture is far more complex (see Sadock and Zwicky 1985 for seminal work; Siemund 2018 for a recent comprehensive account; and Gärtner and Steinbach 2006, 2019 for cognitive considerations).

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The goal of theoretical linguistic work that addresses this complexity of the interface between syntax and speech acts is to identify the more abstract semantic-pragmatic concepts that are encoded in morphosyntax and that ultimately constitute (or at least are compatible with) major illocutionary forces such as assertion, question, and request in (1) above. One such example for the language I will be concerned with in this paper is Truckenbrodt's (2006) detailed analysis of the relevant syntax-semantics of German word order. In particular, in his programmatic paper Truckenbrodt (2006) decomposes the relevant meaning components of illocutionary forces into a deontic component of the speaker's intention and an epistemic feature based on the idea of a common ground between speaker and addressee. This approach has been discussed by many works on German word order and the V-to-C movement operation (see Tsiknakis 2022 for a recent book-length investigation; and Trotzke 2020 for a case study). However, in the present contribution I would like to take a step back and bring in the social dimension of meaning that so far has played no role in syntax-semantics accounts like Truckenbrodt's (2006) analysis. However, recent work has addressed social meaning components such as 'commitment' or 'politeness' (Krifka 2023; Miyagawa 2022; Portner et al., 2019), and this paper builds on those more recent developments.

Crucially, focusing on the social dimension of meaning as encoded in syntax will allow me to rethink the canonicity assumption implicit in Searle's (1969) classical examples, but also in linguistic research such as Truckenbrodt's (2006) account mentioned above. In a nutshell, I will argue for the following new approach to canonicity at the syntax-pragmatics interface: Canonical versions of a speech act are those which are *pragmatically* unmarked, which means that they can be used in a less restricted set of situations. Crucially, I postulate that any theory of the syntax of speech acts should take into account that speech acts are always directed at someone—and this is why the social dimension of meaning is so important when we consider the relevant morphosyntactic forms. Once we do that, we can hypothesize that the polite versions of any speech act are the less restricted forms, compared to the versions that do not indicate any politeness. This is because you can be polite to anyone (e.g., both to your brother and to a stranger—your brother would be happy). However, this does not work the other way around: It is probably fine to be less polite with your brother, but you cannot be impolite when talking to a stranger, at least if you care about achieving your respective illocutionary goals. Accordingly, the driving hypothesis of the paper is that we can refer to a specific version of a speech act as canonical if this version is the pragmatically unmarked (less restricted) version of that speech act. I will show that the three major speech act types requests, questions, and assertions comply with a socio-pragmatic principle which I will call 'maximize politeness'. To illustrate this account with some relevant data, I will focus on the syntax-pragmatics of discourse particles in German.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I will introduce the basic ideas of a socio-economic model of communication and how this model relates to the phenomenon of politeness in the domain of indirect speech acts. Section 3 presents the empirical core of the paper and discusses both the syntactic and the pragmatic details of three German particle elements that all have an effect of politeness in their respective speech acts (*bitte* 'please' in requests; *denn* 'then' in questions; and *ja* 'yes' in assertions). I will argue that all three elements can syntactically be characterized as functional heads, and I will show that, pragmatically, they are used in the unmarked/canonical version of the respective speech acts. Section 4 summarizes the main empirical points and combines the aspects of all three particles into a single syntactic analysis that can potentially be applied to further domains where the socio-pragmatic principle of 'maximize politeness' is relevant for performing speech acts. To understand this abstract principle in the first place, let us now turn to the basic concepts of a socio-economic model of communication.

2. Politeness and the social economics of communication

Searle (1975) himself pointed out a prominent example that falls into the domain of the proposed principle 'maximize politeness' and that is best illustrated by his famous *Can you pass the salt?* This example illustrates how particular syntactic forms such as (1b)—syntax with subject-auxiliary inversion in English—can be used for more speech acts than just questioning (e.g., for requesting an action).

Many of those cases have been labelled 'indirect speech acts', meaning that an 'indirect' meaning is inferred via Gricean pragmatics, while the direct ('literal') interpretation is still present (see Meibauer 2019 for a recent account). After a few decades since Searle's (1975) seminal work, there are reasons to doubt that this way of characterizing the phenomenon is accurate. For instance, recent theoretical work rather claims that the syntax of *Can you VP* has grammaticalized (or 'pragmatized') into a so-called natural convention of signaling requesting force (see Simons and Zollman 2019 and Section 4 below). Crucially, this is supported by psycholinguistic work showing that forms of the type *Can you VP* are actually processed faster than a 'direct' counterpart such as *Please give me the salt!* (Ruytenbeek 2017; Trotzke and Reimer 2023).

Be that as it may, the point is that the phenomenon of indirect speech acts such as *Can you pass the salt?* is representative of a general tendency of language users to pay for social debt when performing speech acts by means of

to the three most prominent examples in that domain and have a closer look at the particle *bitte* ('please') in requests, *denn* ('then') in questions, and *ja* ('yes') in assertions.

3. Politeness and German particle elements

It is a common assumption that elements such as discourse particles and discourse markers signal non-canonical versions of speech acts. For example, Wiltschko (2021: 87) summarizes:

[...] the assumptions that facilitate the use of canonical assertions and questions. [...] the world does not always follow our assumptions of what is normal and neither do our mental states. This is where discourse markers come into play. In case the canonical way cannot be followed, utterances are marked.

And in fact, this is true of many of the particles in the inventory of German. For instance, they can mark different types of rhetorical and expressive questions (Trotzke 2023), marked versions of imperatives (Schwager 2010; Grosz 2011), or assertions used as a correction statement (Grosz 2010).

However, the claim that such particle elements always signal marked and thus 'non-canonical' versions of the respective speech acts is problematic for some of the most prominent cases. An obvious case in point is the particle element *bitte*, and this also extends to its English counterpart *please*. The interesting point indicating that *please* and *bitte* mark default cases of the relevant speech act is that you cannot be wrong when you use *please* (or in German *bitte*). Let us look at the felicity of *please* within a social constellation between a boss and her employee, assuming that the boss is socially superior to the employee and that they entertain an institutional and thus formal relationship only:

(5) [Employee to boss]

- a. # Send me the file about our last electricity bill!
- b. Please send me the file about our last electricity bill!

(6) [Boss to employee]

- a. Send me the file about our last electricity bill!
- b. Please send me the file about our last electricity bill!

The examples above illustrate that employees are unlikely to use the version in (5a), but rather use elements such as *please* when speaking to a superior (5b). However, a boss might choose between the two versions in (6a) and (6b) because it would be completely natural for a superior as well to use a version containing *please* when speaking to a subordinate. This indicates that the use of *please* (or German *bitte*, as we will see below) can be considered the default and thus unmarked case of performing a request.² This goes against the pervasive assumption that particle elements as such always signal marked versions of a specific speech act. Interestingly, German *bitte* has some more features that will be relevant for extending the analysis of *bitte* also to other particles in the next sections. Let us now look at German *bitte* in more detail.

3.1. The directive particle *bitte*

Strictly speaking, the German element *bitte* does not belong to the syntactic category of so-called 'discourse' particles in German. This can easily be seen when we compare *bitte* with other particles that are licensed in directive speech acts such as *ruhig* ('quietly') and *bloß* ('only'). In particular, while *bitte* can appear in both clause-medial (7a) and clause-initial (7b) position, discourse particles like *ruhig* and *bloß* can occur clause-medially only (8a/9a), and a clause-initial positioning would be ungrammatical (8b/9b). Nevertheless, I will gloss *bitte* as PRT as well because syntactically it is a particle element (see arguments below).³

² Let me add the anecdotal remark that this might also be the reason why parents instruct their children to always use *please* when they perform a request because there are only very few scenarios you can think of where using *please* would be pragmatically odd in a directive speech act (e.g., in a military order: # *Please stand to attention!*).

³ It is also classified as a particle element in the preeminent language resource of Standard German 'DUDEN'; see: <https://www.duden.de/>.

(7) a. Schick mir bitte die Datei!

send me PRT the file

‘Please send me the file!’

b. Bitte schick mir die Datei!

(8) a. Schick mir ruhig die Datei!

send me PRT the file

‘Just send me the file, no worries.’

b. *Ruhig schick mir die Datei!

(9) a. Schick mir bloß die Datei!


send me PRT the file

‘Do you hear me? You shall send me the file!’

b. *Bloß schick mir die Datei!

The patterns in (8) and (9) are compatible with a syntactic analysis along the lines of [Bayer and Obenauer \(2011\)](#) and [Bayer and Trotzke \(2015\)](#) where the particle stays in situ (in the TP domain of the clause) and is linked via agreement at a distance with the domain of the clause that, according to this approach, encodes illocutionary force:

(10) [_{ForceP} Force⁰ _{iForce} [_{TopP} ... [_{Prt} _{iForce} ...]]]



This analysis where the particle stays in a clause-medial position is supported by many aspects of particle syntax, one of which is that the position of discourse particles interacts with information-structural configurations in the German clause, indicated in (10) by the category ‘Top(ic) P(hrase)’, which always occurs to the left of the particle (see [Grosz 2016](#); [Trotzke 2018](#); [Gonzalez Lopez and Trotzke 2021](#)).

While this restriction to clause-medial position does not hold for German *bitte*, the element nevertheless shares some syntactic features with discourse particles such as *ruhig* and *bloß*. In particular, just like discourse particles and unlike most adverbs *bitte* cannot be modified (11a) nor can it be coordinated (11b); see [Woods \(2020: 131\)](#) for similar remarks on English *please*:⁴

(11) a. Schick mir (*sehr) bitte die Datei!

send me (*very) PRT the file

‘(*Very) Please send me the file!’

b. Schick mir bitte (*und doch) die Datei!

send me PRT and PRT the file

‘Please (because that’s not a big deal) send me the file!’

⁴ The particle element *doch* in (11b) comes closest to the politeness meaning that is also conveyed by *bitte* since *doch* in imperatives is downtoning the difficulty/importance of the action requested from the addressee. The point is that the meaning of *doch* is thus in principle compatible with the effect of *bitte*. This can be seen in the relevant translation ‘Please (because that’s not a big deal) do X’. However, syntactically it is not possible to coordinate the two elements—and in this respect *bitte* patterns with the class of discourse particles.

All in all, these observations indicate that *bitte* can syntactically be characterized as a functional head and in this regard patterns with discourse particles (see [Munaro and Poletto 2002](#) for seminal work on the diagnostics for the head status of discourse particles).⁵

[Woods \(2020\)](#) arrives at the same conclusion for English *please*, and she proposes an analysis where *please* heads an Illocutionary Act Phrase (IAP). In her analysis, this phrase is higher than the clausal domain that determines the clause type (i.e., the CP domain) because *please* is to some extent independent of the clause type, meaning that it can occur in different types of clauses. Proposing such an IAP allows [Woods \(2020\)](#) to also capture the distribution of evidential adverbs (12a) and vocatives (12b) because those, just like *please*, convey information about the speaker's intention when uttering the content determined in CP; see [Woods \(2020: 134\)](#):

- (12) a. [IAP [AdvP *Obviously*] [IA' [IA *please*] [CP *do stay a while*]]]
 b. [IAP [DP *Saleh*] [IA' [IA *please*] [CP *do stay a while*]]]

Clause-initial occurrences of *please* are then derived by [Woods's \(2020\)](#) analysis via movement operations to an even higher projection called 'Speech Act Phrase' ([Hill 2007](#))—but those details would take me too far afield in this context.

The aspect I would like to focus on is the base position of *please* in [Woods's \(2020\)](#) analysis (i.e., where *please* is merged in the first place). The main claim underlying this analysis is that *please* is a request marker and thus merged as an overt realization of a functional head that determines the illocutionary act, which is syntactically represented as 'IA' in (12) above. While I do think that the analysis in terms of a functional head can also be adopted for German *bitte*, in the following I will propose that the semantic-pragmatic meaning of *bitte* is presumably broader than postulated in the analysis by [Woods \(2020\)](#).

As for the meaning component of German *bitte*, [Zimmermann \(2009\)](#) has proposed an analysis of this element where the meaning of *bitte* is much broader than just being a marker of requesting force. In particular, he claims that *bitte* signals speaker-hearer asymmetries in different semantic-pragmatic domains, and his main piece of evidence for such a broader notion of the meaning of *bitte* is that German *bitte* can also be used in utterances with no requesting force. Look at his examples in (13) where *bitte* is used in a transaction of possession (13a) and in a *wh*-interrogative (13b); see [Zimmermann \(2009: 54\)](#):

- (13) a. Hier ist bitte (schön) das Geld.
 here is PRT (PRT) the money
 'There you are, here is the money.'
 b. Wer (bitte) hat (bitte) geläutet?
 who (PRT) has (PRT) called
 'Who has called please?'

Regarding both examples, [Zimmermann \(2009\)](#) points out that *bitte* conveys a politeness effect, and thus the non-requesting uses of *bitte* in (13) feature the same politeness effect as the more frequent uses in requesting speech acts. However, [Zimmermann \(2009\)](#) rejects an analysis in terms of politeness and argues for an even broader account where *bitte* obligatorily expresses speaker-hearer asymmetries.

In the following, I will argue for an politeness account instead and briefly show that two main pieces of evidence that [Zimmermann \(2009\)](#) provides for the claim that we find no *bitte* without such a speaker-hearer asymmetry are simply not corroborated empirically.⁶ The first data point is that *bitte* (and English *please*), according to [Zimmermann \(2009: 57\)](#), is "ruled out" in *Let's* imperatives because in those imperatives all interlocutors are typically in an equal position and there is thus no asymmetry. Specifically, according to him, the reading in (i) is not possible, and the only interpretation can be an asymmetric request reading (ii); see [Zimmermann \(2009: 57\)](#):

⁵ I hasten to add that [Cardinaletti \(2011, 2015\)](#), [Coniglio \(2011\)](#), [Manzini \(2015\)](#), and others have proposed an alternative approach according to which discourse particles are adverb-like maximal projections. Since I do not have the space to discuss this approach in more detail, I refer to [Bayer and Obenauer \(2011\)](#); [Bayer \(2012\)](#); [Bayer and Trotzke \(2015\)](#); [Trotzke and Monforte \(2019\)](#) for an extensive list of empirical counterarguments.

⁶ [Zimmermann \(2009: Section 4.2\)](#) provides three pieces of evidence in total. The third piece not discussed here (non-felicity of *bitte* in insubordinate verb-final *ob*-interrogatives) concerns highly subtle speaker judgments and, crucially, can neither be corroborated nor falsified easily via online Google or corpus searches because (i) this minor clause type is very rare and (ii) it is string-identical with embedded *ob*-interrogatives ('whether'-interrogatives). Be that as it may, even if this piece of evidence would stand up to empirical scrutiny, it is questionable if this marginal data point could substantiate a whole-new account of *bitte*.

(14) Lasst uns bitte gehen!

let us PRT go

(i) # ‘Please let’s go!’

(ii) ‘Please let us go!’

I object to the judgment that German *bitte* would be odd in the interpretation given in (i) where all interlocutors are in an equal position—but this objection would of course be based on introspection only as well. Accordingly, to make my case stronger that the pattern claimed by Zimmermann (2009) in (14) is simply not corroborated by the facts, I would like to mention that a simple Google search for *Please let’s* in English yields thousands of cases where *please* is not separated by a comma (intonation), and where the context does not indicate any asymmetry whatsoever between interlocutors. Here is just one example from the *New York Times*, citing a famous actress who is speaking to her peers at the Golden Globe ceremony:

(15) So as we enter this new year, please let’s continue to hold each other accountable and invest

in and make and champion these stories.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/08/opinion/golden-globes-washington-women.html>>

The second piece of evidence adduced by Zimmermann (2009) is that, according to him, *bitte* cannot occur in permissive imperatives because in this type of speech act, the speaker has no requesting authority and the addressee has no circumstantial authority to bring about *p*. We are thus looking at a case of no speaker-hearer asymmetry. This is why *bitte*, according to Zimmermann (2009: 57), cannot cooccur with the German discourse particle *ruhig*, already introduced in (6a) above, which indicates the permissive-imperative reading.

Again, a simple Google search proves those claims wrong. German *bitte* can cooccur with the particle *ruhig* without any problems, as evidenced both in online-forum conversations (16) and nonfiction book publications (17)⁷:

(16) Und nimm bitte ruhig Beckas Angebot an

and take PRT PRT Becka’s offer on

‘And please just accept Becka’s offer, no worries!’

<<https://stillen-und-tragen.de/forum/viewtopic.php?t=111425>>

(17) Nimm bitte ruhig Latein mit, wenn es nicht zu teuer und Dir zu viel ist!

take PRT PRT Latin with if it not to expensive and you.DAT to much is

‘Please just take Latin [the book] with you if it’s not too expensive and a bit too much!’

<Carl Schmitt: *Jugendbriefe: Briefschaften an seine Schwester Auguste 1906-1913*, edited

by Ernst Hüsmert. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, p. 46>

In sum, many of the empirical data points mentioned by Zimmermann (2009) in favor of an account where *bitte* can only occur in scenarios of speaker-hearer asymmetry are just not accurate. That leaves us with the standard assumption that *bitte* across speech acts—including requests, transactions of possession (13a), and information-seeking questions (13b)—is adding politeness information to the speech act. The only reason left for assuming that this might not be enough for capturing the contribution of *bitte* are the dialectal data from Upper German about the combination *bitt(e)’ schön* mentioned by Zimmermann (2009: 54) in declarative examples such as (18):

⁷ It is worth pointing out that the interpretation in those cases of stacked particles is still compositional/hierarchical in the sense that *bitte* (the down-toning meaning, see below) scopes over *ruhig* (the permission reading, see above).

(18) Das hat bitt schön eine ganz andere Qualität.

that has PRT PRT a quite different quality

‘That is of quite a different quality, you know!’

It is not clear that the combination of *bitt(e)* and *schön*, where *schön* is obligatory, is the same particle element as standard German *bitte*. However, let us for the moment adopt this view because it is interesting to note in accordance with Zimmermann (2009) that *bitt(e)* *schön* in those cases adds a strengthening effect that to some extent might be compared to the effects that can also be induced by the declarative discourse particle *ja* (‘yes’). In particular, also in the case of *bitt(e)* *schön* the speaker requests the hearer that *p* is part of the common ground.⁸ This is an interesting parallel between a variant of *bitte* and *ja* (again, assuming that we accept equating *bitte* with Upper German *bitt(e)* *schön*). I will come back to this observation when I talk about *ja* and its politeness effect in more detail in Section 3.3 below.

To summarize, we have seen that German *bitte* can syntactically be characterized as a functional head, similar to English *please*. It is syntactically more mobile than German discourse particles, but at the same time shares many syntactic aspects with those particle elements. Pragmatically, *bitte* can be analyzed as an element that adds a politeness component across clause types and speech acts. The only exception might be the Upper German variant and its occurrence in declaratives (18), where politeness is not obvious, and we observe a reading that to some extent resembles the interpretation of the German declarative particle *ja*—an observation I will come back to in Section 3.3 below. Looking at *bitte* in imperatives, we have seen that *bitte*—just like other discourse particles—cannot be coordinated with discourse particles expressing a similar meaning. In particular, *bitte* cannot be coordinated with *doch* (see example [11b] above), which is downtoning the difficulty/importance of the action requested from the addressee. This indicates how the politeness effect of *bitte* comes about in imperatives: In terms of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) notion of politeness, the meaning contribution of the particle *bitte* is to reduce the degree *R* to which the respective face-threatening act *x* (here: IMP) is considered an imposition (Rx; see Section 2 above). The meaning of both the imperative and the particle *bitte* can thus be summarized as follows:

(19) a. [[IMP]] = ‘S wants from A that A *p*.’

b. [[*bitte*_{IMP}]] = ‘S expresses that the degree of imposition of IMP is low.’

The meaning contribution sketched in (19b) is the reason why the use of English *please* and hence also German *bitte* is the default and unmarked case of performing a request, as we have already illustrated at the outset of this section. As we have also seen above, we also find *bitte* in questions (13b), with the same effect of politeness. In what follows, I will argue that information-seeking questions in German feature a dedicated particle for signaling politeness in questions; the use of this particle can thus be considered the unmarked and default case of asking a question, similar to the unmarked status of *bitte* in requests.

3.2. The question particle *denn*

There are only few particle elements in the literature on German particles that have received so much attention as the question particle *denn* (‘then’). Syntactic work on this particle has pointed out that its base position is in the typical clause-medial particle position (10), but in addition to occurring clause-medially in the unmarked case (20a), *denn* can also occur in the left periphery (20b); see Bayer and Obenauer (2011); Bayer and Trotzke (2015):

(20) a. Wo ist denn die Datei?

where is PRT the file

‘Where is the file?’

b. Wo denn ist die Datei?

The configuration in (20b) is not unique to *denn*. All particles felicitous in *wh*-questions can potentially occur in the left periphery. This left peripheral co-constituency of a *wh*-element and a particle is a special version of the question, and it is marked both phonetically (Trotzke and Turco 2015) and semantically (Trotzke 2017). Accordingly, I will not go into the details about the syntax of those left peripheral particles because in this paper I’m interested in the unmarked versions of performing speech acts. This leaves us with the version in (20a).

In the context of the particle’s base position, I would first like to highlight that in this unmarked position the particle *denn* is often cliticized in spoken German:

⁸ Although Zimmermann (2009: 56) adds that, in contrast to *ja*, *bitt(e)* *schön* obligatory features a speaker-hearer asymmetry—a judgement not confirmed by 6 native speakers of Upper German I consulted. I thus consider this issue open.

- (20^a) a. Wo ist=n die Datei?
 where is-N the file
 ‘Where is the file?’

In this context, Bayer (2012) has claimed that the clitic version of *denn* (-n) is even obligatory in genuine *wh*-questions in Bavarian and can thus be characterized as a pure question marker (see also Pankau 2020 for other varieties). In what follows, I will adopt this line of thought also for the semantics-pragmatics of *denn* and provide some arguments for why we can think of *denn* (and its corresponding clitic version in spoken varieties) as the default version of asking for information in German. In other words, *denn* in questions can be compared to *bitte* in requests (Section 3.1 above)—both particles are used in the unmarked version of performing the respective speech act.

When we turn to the semantics-pragmatics of *denn*, we are confronted with a wide range of accounts that tried to characterize the detailed contribution and the exact use conditions of *denn*. There is no empirical work on the meaning of *denn* in questions as such, only some corpus work on its use in conditionals (Zobel and Csipak 2016) and experimental research on its licensing conditions in embedded vs. non-embedded environments (Czypionka et al., 2021). We will thus have to look at the theoretical claims. As a starting point, let us look at the following key example that is mentioned by almost every account of *denn*, and that goes back to König (1977). Look at the following scenario (see König 1977: 119):

- (21) [A wakes up B and A asks:]
 # Wie spät ist es denn?
 how late is it PRT
 ‘What time is it?’

(21) should illustrate that the use of *denn* is infelicitous when the addressee (B, who has just woken up) lacks a ‘common ground’ in which to interpret the question. In other words, *denn* indicates that there is a reason for posing the question, and this reason can be found in the common discourse context—which is lacking in the scenario in (21).

This observation has led many scholars to claim that *denn* cannot be used out-of-the-blue (i.e., discourse-initially). For example, Büring (2024: 297) has recently stated that the example above (i.e., *Wie spät ist es denn?* ‘What time is it?’) “is infelicitous if uttered out-of-the-blue to someone at the bus stop (though the question without *denn*, of course, is perfectly natural).” This goes against other observations where we clearly see that *denn* can be used within such a scenario of asking a stranger for information. For instance, in her comprehensive study on *denn* Theiler (2021) has pointed out a number of natural examples where this particle can be used out-of-the-blue without any problems. Here is one case mentioned by Theiler (2021: 345):

- (22) [Someone asking a passerby:]
 Wie komme ich denn von hier zum Bahnhof?
 how come I PRT from here to.the train.station
 ‘How do I get to the station from here?’

I totally agree with Theiler’s (2021) data, and in fact for me a *wh*-question with *denn* would be the most natural way to ask a stranger for information. The reason is that *denn* in those cases has the same effect as the use of other linguistic means that allow a speaker to approach a stranger out-of-the-blue with a question in the first place. In particular, given what I have already introduced in Section 2, ‘questions are not socially free’ (Levinson 2012), and the default assumption is that speakers have to be indirect and polite to some extent to comply with the social economics of communication. That is, pace Büring (2024), it would be awkward and unnatural to approach a stranger at a bus stop with the bare version in (23a), simply because it would be harsh and impolite to do so. One would rather use versions such as (23b) or, alternatively, (23c)⁹:

⁹ Some (native) speakers might argue that ‘politeness’ is a misnomer for the effect that *denn* has in (23c) and would characterize the contribution of *denn* differently. For instance, teaching materials for German paraphrase the contribution of *denn* in questions addressing a stranger as ‘highlighting a friendly interest’: “*Denn* in Fragen hebt das freundliche Interesse des Sprechers hervor (*Wie viel kostet denn der Tisch?*). [*Denn* in questions highlights the friendly interest of the speaker (*How much is ‘denn’ the table?*)]” (Evans et al., 2012: Unterrichtsplan Lektion 4). However, it is uncontroversial that *denn* does have an effect in examples like (23c)—and that this effect improves the felicity of questions when approaching a stranger and/or in out-of-the-blue contexts. In the following paragraphs, I will propose an analysis of the effect of *denn* where we can keep the term ‘politeness’ nevertheless once we refer to Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory and take into account more specific components of politeness (e.g., reducing the degree of imposition).

- (23) [At a bus stop, asking a stranger out-of-the-blue:]
- a. # Wie spät ist es? [- polite]
 how late is it
 ‘What time is it?’
- b. Entschuldigen Sie, wie spät ist es? [+ polite]
 excuse you how late is it
 ‘Excuse me, what time is it?’
- c. Wie spät ist es denn? [+ polite]

The use of *denn* would thus be another strategy in accordance with the socio-pragmatic principle of ‘maximize politeness’ (Sections 1 and 2 above)—assuming that complying with this principle is the default case when asking an information-seeking question in an unmarked scenario like the one given in (23). If this is on the right track, we are still left with some scenarios that may need an explanation that goes beyond a mere effect of politeness. Have a look at [Büring’s \(2024: 292–293\)](#) felicity patterns of *denn* in German polar questions:

- (24) a. [at the museum ticket counter:]
 A: One ticket please.
 U (the ticket sales person): Bist du (*denn) schon 18?
 are you PRT already 18
- b. [at the adult film theater ticket booth:]
 A: One ticket please.
 U (the ticket sales person): Bist du (denn) schon 18?
 are you PRT already 18

The point about those examples is that the ticket sales person in (24a) can perfectly ask about the customer’s age, given that tickets are cheaper for minors than for adults. However, it would be odd to use *denn* in such a case. In contrast, the customer at the adult film theater makes the implicit claim that he is already 18 by the very act of asking for a ticket, and the sales person can take up the customer on this claim. According to [Büring’s \(2024: 292\)](#), *denn* “need(s) to address a contextually given Claim,” and this is why *denn* can be used felicitously in (24b).

I think we can unify the observations regarding politeness in (23) and the pattern mentioned by [Büring \(2024\)](#) in (24) if we assume the following basic felicity condition for *denn* in both polar and *wh*-questions (see [Göbel and Schwarz, 2023](#) for the general format and [Gutzmann 2015](#) for a related paraphrase):

- (25) [$denn_{PRT} \phi$] is felicitous only if $[[denn_{PRT}]](\llbracket \phi \rrbracket)(R)$

(25) represents that the precontext of *denn* (the question) must be related to contextual R(easons) for asking the question. First, note that this could explain the pattern in (24) right away. In (24b), we have a salient reason for the ticket sales person to ask the question, namely the implicit claim of the customer that he is already 18 (otherwise, he would not ask for a ticket at this particular type of theater). On the other hand, (24a) has no such reason in its precontext because the customer is not claiming that he is either a minor (eligible to a cheaper admission) or an adult (having to pay the full price). The use of *denn* in such a context is thus infelicitous because the ticket sales person would relate her question to a reason which is simply not there.

Let us now turn to the out-of-the-blue usage. By definition, there is no precontext, and this separates such scenarios from the ones in (24). At a bus stop when approaching a stranger, the speaker introduces a context in the first place, and by using *denn* he claims that there are reasons for asking the question—and this is why *denn* in the default scenario of asking a stranger for information is adding politeness to the question. The addressee does not need to know the reasons (in fact, in the standard

scenario it would be awkward if the speaker would provide the detailed reasons for why he would like to know the time). All the addressee needs to know is that the speaker has his reasons and is thus in (urgent) need of the time. All in all, the different scenarios of using *denn* can find a unified explanation by assuming a basic semantics along the lines of (25).

We can now again combine this with the model of communication and the general notion of politeness introduced in Section 2 above: Since *denn* indicates that there are reasons for asking about information, it reduces the degree *R* to which the face-threatening act of asking a question (*Q*) is considered an imposition, which can be summarized as follows:

- (26) a. $[[Q]] = \text{'S does not know } p \text{ (or parts of } p \text{) and wants A to provide } p \text{ (or parts of } p \text{).}'$
 b. $[[denn_Q]] = \text{'S expresses that the degree of imposition of } Q \text{ is low because there are reasons for } Q \text{'}$

The only issue we are left with is the classical example by König (1977) in (21). I would like to mention two aspects of this example: Imagine again you wake up someone and ask him about the time. To my mind, this is an awkward situation per se and asking any such question (regardless of the particle) would be odd if you wake someone up and ask him about some information right away. However, I agree that the version with *denn* is even more odd, and according to my account sketched above this is because *denn* additionally conveys that there are reasons for asking the question. Accordingly, if you as the one just woken up are not only confronted with an information-seeking question, but moreover with the claim that there are reasons for asking the question, then this is just too much information for someone who just woke up and is still dazed with sleep. I know that this is a rather trivial explanation, but it seems to be the most obvious one for why the information-seeking question in (21) is infelicitous in such a scenario.

Let us summarize before we turn to the final particle case to be discussed in this paper. We have shown that the German particle *denn* in its unmarked reading is another clause-medial particle element that can even appear as a clitic on the finite verb in spoken German, and in some varieties the clitic version is claimed to be obligatory in information-seeking questions. As for the semantics-pragmatics, we have seen that there are clear counter-examples in the literature to the widespread claim that *denn* cannot be used in out-of-the-blue contexts. We have sketched a unified broad semantics for *denn* that can potentially explain the patterns mentioned in the literature. Crucially, this semantic characterization is also compatible with the view that the use of *denn* is actually the unmarked version of a German information-seeking question in default scenarios such as approaching a stranger and ask him for practical information.

The situation with the particle *denn* is thus very similar to what we have seen in the context of the default requesting device *bitte* ('please') in Section 3.1. In both cases, we can say that the contribution of the respective particle is to reduce the degree of imposition of the face-threatening act (either request or question), hence adding politeness to the utterance. It is worth noting that both particle elements concern directive speech acts, and we now explore to what extent this view can also be extended to non-directive speech acts such as assertions.

3.3. A brief look at the assertion particle *ja*

In this final subsection, I would like to briefly indicate to what extent the account sketched for the particles *bitte* (Section 3.1) and *denn* (Section 3.2) can be extended to non-directive uses of particles. We have already seen in Section 3.1 that the dialectal element *bitt(e)' schön* can appear in assertions in Upper German, and that the effect is a strengthening one where the speaker requests or even forces the hearer that *p* is already part of the common ground. As already mentioned in Section 3.1, this effect can be compared to the typical assertion particle *ja* ('yes'), which is probably the most frequent particle in the German language (see Dörre 2018 for relevant corpus work). Since this particle is so frequent in both spoken and written German, it is also probably the most well-studied element in the syntax-semantics literature on German particles. Accordingly, I will not discuss all the various accounts, but rather focus on what can be called the particle's core meaning contribution (for the most comprehensive and up-to-date overview of research on *ja*, see Viesel's 2023 dissertation). To sketch this core meaning contribution, let us adopt a famous paraphrase by Kratzer (1999):¹⁰

- (27) **Ja** α is appropriate in a context *c* if the proposition expressed by α in *c* is a fact of w_c which—
 for all the speaker knows—might already be known to the addressee.

As for the syntax, the following example indicates that, syntactically, *ja* appears as a clause-medial particle as well (and, as discussed in Section 3.1, is a functional head in the TP domain of the clause):

¹⁰ It is fair to say that this paraphrase of the meaning of *ja* is probably the most uncontroversial characterization of the relevant semantics, which can also be seen in recent studies on how this core meaning is interpreted in ironic utterances (Härtl and Thimm, 2024).

(28) Die Datei ist ja gestohlen.

the file is PRT stolen

‘The file has been stolen.’

In what follows, I will argue that the particular meaning of *ja* in (27) is the reason for why this frequent particle can also be analyzed as a means to comply with the socio-pragmatic principle ‘maximize politeness’ in the social economics of communication. This also explains why it is used in such high frequency in German assertions and, according to my account, probably part of the default and unmarked way of performing an assertion speech act in this language. Let us mention two main characteristics of assertions in communication that support such an account.

First, in line with seminal work by Zaefferer (2001) and Truckenbrodt (2006), we can view speech acts from the perspective of the speaker and characterize “all sentential speech acts as volitional on the part of the speaker [...] S wants something, wishes for something, invites A to do something etc.” (Truckenbrodt 2006: 263–264). Given this deontic notion of force and given that speech acts in most of the current literature are modelled in terms of the epistemic notion of ‘common ground’, Truckenbrodt (2006: 264) suggest the following speech act paraphrase for assertions:

(29) S wants from A that it is common ground that *p*.

If we assume this basic idea of what an assertion is in the first place, we can now turn to the second characteristic feature of assertions in communication that allows us to analyze examples featuring *ja* as unmarked cases of performing the assertion speech act. The second aspect we can take into account is that, according to Levinson’s (2012) socio-economic model of communication, “information gain runs parallel to social debt” (Levinson 2012: 25). This makes perfect sense for directive speech acts such as information-seeking questions: The more information I ask for, the more I have to ‘pay’ for it (in terms of politeness, for instance).

As for this particular aspect of information transfer, things are exactly the other way around in assertions. More specifically, in the case of assertions the speaker provides the information, and the addressee can accept it (or not). However, according to the notion of assertion in (29), the goal of performing an assertion speech act on the part of the speaker is to get the addressee to add the information *p* to her belief set and thus eventually to the common ground shared between speaker and addressee. Given this concept, we can easily see how the degree of the value of information might also play a role in assertions. If the degree of information value is low (no radical new facts are communicated), it is easier for the addressee to accept *p*, and thus it will be less challenging overall to add the new information to the common ground between speaker and addressee. On the other hand, it is thus predicted that if the speaker would like to add groundbreaking news to the common ground, then this probably increases social debt on the part of the speaker, meaning that the speaker has to invest more to get the addressee to accept *p*. I hasten to add that this might be an idealized view of how communication works,¹¹ but the basic idea is quite natural and in accordance with Levinson’s (2012) model of communication.

Let us now turn back to examples featuring the particle *ja*. As pointed out in (27) above, the core meaning contribution of this element is to present *p* (or parts of *p*) as already known by the addressee. In terms of information transfer, we can thus say that *ja* has the effect of minimizing the information value of *p* because *p* is presented as less new and informative. In Brown and Levinson’s (1987) terms, one could say that by lowering the information value the speaker helps to save the addressee’s face, hence the politeness effect of using the particle *ja*. Just as we did for the other particles *bitte* and *denn* in Sections 3.1 and 3.2 above, we can thus sketch the politeness effect of *ja* in terms of reducing the degree of imposition for the addressee A:

(30) a. [[ASSERT]] = ‘S wants from A that it is common ground that *p*.’

b. [*ja*_{ASSERT}] = ‘S expresses that the degree of imposition of ASSERT is low

because *p* has low information value.

Crucially, *ja* can appear in assertions with both high information value (31a) and low(est) information value (31b):

¹¹ The same idealization holds for politeness theory in general. In particular, Brown and Levinson’s (1987: 56) model is based on an idealized “Model Person” who is a rational and face-endowed individual.

(31) a. [uttered to an employee who doesn't know about the stealing yet:]

Die Datei ist ja gestohlen, also müssen wir uns etwas anderes überlegen.
 the file is PRT stolen so must we us something different think.about
 'The file has been stolen, so we have to think about something else.'

b. Die Sonne ist ja gestern wie jeden Abend untergegangen.

the sun is PRT yesterday as every night down.went
 'As every night, the sun set yesterday.'

This indicates that using *ja* in assertions in German can be considered the default case and, just like in the cases of *bitte* in requests (Section 3.1) and *denn* in questions (Section 3.2), one cannot be wrong when using this particle because signaling that the speaker aims at lowering the degree of information value in an assertion (and hence investing more to get the addressee to accept *p*) is complying with the principle of 'maximize politeness' in the socio-economic view of communication sketched in Section 2 above.¹²

With these case studies of German particles in mind, we now turn to the general outlook of a syntactic program that takes into account this socio-pragmatic aspect of performing the major speech acts of requesting, questioning, and asserting.

4. Outlook: Towards a social syntax

At the outset of this paper, we started with the basic observation that the interface between morphosyntactic forms and speech acts is one of the most complex issues in linguistic theory, and the notion of canonical speech act syntax implicit in Searle's (1969) classical work is far too simplistic. The question raised by many works in this context is whether there is any systematic mapping between syntax and speech acts at all. Gärtner and Steinbach (2006) used the opportunity of the publication of Speas and Tenny's (2003) work to critically discuss this age-old question, and they ended with the skeptical note that theories in this domain could only succeed by introducing fundamentally different assumptions about language and the interface between syntax and speech acts. The goal of the present paper has been to exactly do that and provide a different type of "outside theory of language and discourse to interact with syntax" (Gärtner and Steinbach 2006) by referring to Levinson's (2012) socio-economic model of communication and a notion of politeness in terms of face threatening (Brown and Levinson 1987). More specifically, I have adopted the general concept that performing a speech act is not socially free (i.e., comes with social costs), and one central 'currency' used to pay social debts are linguistic means of politeness (see Section 2), with politeness being based on a calculation of social distance, power, and the imposition of a face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson 1987). This is why, according to my account, the principle 'maximize politeness' is the default scenario of performing speech acts.

In the rest of the paper, I focused on German particle elements because some of the most frequent particles (or their clitic versions, see Section 3.2) can be analyzed as morphosyntactic means adding politeness information to the major speech acts of requesting, questioning, and asserting. Given this analysis and the socio-pragmatic view that complying with 'maximize politeness' is the default case in communication, those particles are thus realized as part of the unmarked versions of the respective speech acts.

The question I would like to address now in this final outlook section is *how* we can represent this interface between syntax and social meaning in our theories about the syntax of speech acts. I will not address the question *whether* we should represent this meaning component in our syntactic theories in the first place. This question would touch upon more fundamental issues revolving around the cartographic enterprise in syntactic theory (Rizzi 1997, 2014, 2024; Cinque and Rizzi 2010; and many others), and how we should deal with pragmatic/discourse categories within this framework in particular (see Trotzke 2015; Trotzke and Zwart 2014; Struckmeier 2024 for critical discussion). In our context, let me just briefly point out that syntax does seem to have an impact on the social meaning component discussed in this paper if you consider, for instance, the difference in politeness between *Can you pass the salt?* and the syntactic alternative *You can pass the salt!*—both can be used for performing a directive speech act, but with clear differences in their level of politeness and hence social meaning.

Assuming that there is an interface between social meaning components and syntax, we can in fact observe many recent syntactic theories that take into account social notions such as 'commitment' (see, e.g., Krifka 2023; Miyagawa 2022 for

¹² An interesting point raised by a reviewer is the case when assertions are used as responses in a dialogue such as A: 'What time is it?' B: # *Es ist ja 10 Uhr*. 'It is JA 10 o'clock'. In those cases, the particle *ja* would be odd. Since responses (incl. answers to information-seeking questions) are known to feature their own syntactic forms (Holmberg 2013, 2015) and their own particle systems (Wiltschko 2017), I submit that differences in the use of politeness means are to be expected.

seminal studies). However, the most elaborate account of the interface that concerns us here—between syntax and politeness information—has recently been proposed by Portner et al. (2019) in their work on Korean speech-style particles and politeness pronouns in Romance languages. In short, they propose a syntax that distinguishes between two functional domains in the left periphery of the clause. First, they postulate a Sent(ence)Mood Phrase that encodes information regarding clause type (both embedded and non-embedded). In embedded contexts, the head of this projection would be overtly realized by complementizers such as English *that* or *whether*. The second projection (and the genuine innovation of their proposal) is a category that dominates SentMoodP and that they tentatively call ‘cP’. The idea is that this category can host elements like Korean speech-style particles as its functional head because those elements scope over the whole clause type in expressing politeness information (decomposed by Portner et al., 2019 into the two features STATUS and FORMAL).¹³

The following proposal is inspired by this idea that there is a syntactic projection that dominates sentence mood and is related to social meaning components. I will call this topmost projection ‘Soc(ial)P’. Given the discussion in the previous sections, the basic idea of my proposal is that the head of this projection encodes information about the weightiness (*W*) of a face-threatening act (*x*). Have a look at the following formula by Brown and Levinson (1987: 76) again:

$$(32) \quad Wx = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + Rx$$

The weightiness of any act *x* is composed out of the social distance (*D*) between S(peaker) and H(earer), the power (*P*) that H has over S, and the degree to which the respective face-threatening act can be considered an imposition (*Rx*). We have seen in previous sections that the contributions of the particles *bitte*, *denn*, and *ja* has an impact on the degree of imposition. The measure of social distance *D(S,H)* would be relevant for the data Portner et al. (2019) are concerned with: second-person pronouns in Romance languages and speech-style particles in Korean. Finally, we have also mentioned examples in our discussion where the constellations of power between S and H is most relevant. Look at the following examples again, illustrating that German particles can also be used for expressing that H has less power, and S is the one who has power over H:

(33) a. Schick mir ruhig die Datei!

send me PRT the file

‘Just send me the file, no worries.’

b. Schick mir bloß die Datei!

send me PRT the file

‘Do you hear me? You shall send me the file!’

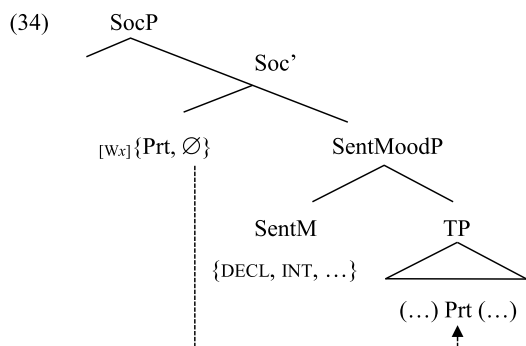
In (33a), the particle *ruhig* turns the imperative into a permission speech act, whereas in (33b) the particle *bloß* signals a threat—in both cases the particles target the power component of the weightiness of the imperative speech act. Crucially, this also shows that German also features particles that signal pragmatically marked versions of speech acts because, in contrast to the particles that reduce the degree of imposition of an act *x* (*bitte*, *denn*, and *ja*), utterances containing particles such as *ruhig* and *bloß* can only be used in a restricted set of situations. On the other hand, utterances containing particles that target the component of the degree of imposition can be used in a less restricted set because those utterances reduce the imposition of face-threatening acts.¹⁴ In short, the benefit of the maximal projection SocP is thus that it unifies social meaning information across the different dimensions of social distance, power, and the degree of imposition of performing an act *x*. While previous proposals such as Portner et al.’s (2019) work have focused on only one of those dimensions (i.e., social distance), the present approach postulates that the role of social meaning in syntax is more multifaceted. Let us now look at the syntax of these cases in more detail and apply the idea of ‘Soc(ial)P’ to our particle cases discussed in Section 3.

We have seen that all the relevant particles (*bitte* in requests, *denn* in questions, and *ja* in assertions) are functional heads. We have argued that all of them contribute to the degree of imposition, which is part of the weightiness of any act *x*. As already mentioned above, I will argue that the head of SocP encodes that weightiness information, and so I will assume that there is a general corresponding feature [W_x]. The weightiness information scopes over the whole utterance meaning that is

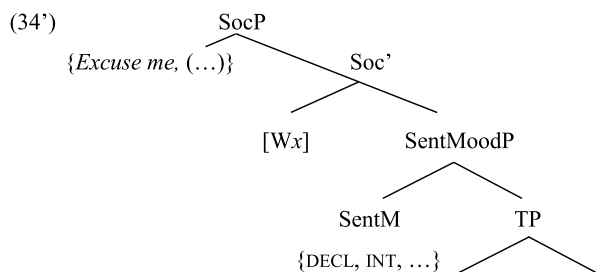
¹³ Portner et al. (2019) go further and provide a formal semantics account of that politeness information in terms of updating a component of the discourse context which they formally define as the ‘participant structure’ and which is based on previous formal implementations of social meaning components (e.g., Potts and Kawahara 2004; McCready 2019). Since the goal of the present paper is to focus on the syntax/pragmatics interface based on a functional approach to politeness and social meaning (see Section 2 above), I don’t have the space to go into further detail about the formal semantics involved.

¹⁴ An interesting point raised by a reviewer is whether some of these particles are therefore ideal candidates for the grammaticalization of sentence-type markers. I will have to leave this to future investigations, but I hasten to add that at least some of the work on German *denn* would be in accordance with such a prediction (Bayer 2012).

computed up to SentMoodP. The difference between the individual particles though is that some of them are more flexible in their occurrence (*bitte*), while others are not (*denn* and *ja*). In the context of the German language, the obvious explanation for this distributional difference has nothing to do with the semantics/pragmatics involved, but is rather due to phonological restrictions only: While *bitte* can appear both in the clausal peripheries (left and right) and with a potential prosodic break (see Woods 2020 on parallel patterns for English *please*), the particles *denn* and *ja* are stuck in the TP domain of the clause, can never be prosodically separated from the rest of the clause, and can only be moved if accompanied by focusable material such as *wh*-phrases (Bayer and Trotzke 2015). Previous research has accounted for this distribution by assuming the probe-goal agreement operation for particles already introduced in Section 3.1. The new idea proposed here is to replace agreement with Force⁰ by agreement with Soc⁰. This makes perfect sense if we take seriously an aspect of many particles that is rarely mentioned in the literature, except for the element *bitte*. Specifically, it is well known that *bitte* can occur across clause types (Section 3.1), but the same holds for the other particles as well: Büring (2024) mentions cases of *denn* in declaratives, and Viesel (2023) provides a lot of empirical evidence for unusual environments of *ja*. Accordingly, the clause-type restrictions of at least those particles seem to be weaker than commonly assumed, let alone their confinement to a specific illocutionary force. The proposal for the syntactic encoding of the three particles discussed in this paper can thus be depicted as follows (with the optional agreement operation, depending on whether there is an overt realization of the particle in the left periphery—like in some clause-initial uses of *bitte*—or not):



Crucially, such an analysis can be a promising avenue for further unifying the analysis of a broader class of phenomena at the interface between syntax and social meaning. In particular, we have already pointed out in the context of questions (Section 3.2) that there of course are alternative strategies for complying with ‘maximize politeness’—the use of particles like *denn* being only one of them. Very often, questions for instance contain clause-initial phrasal elements (of varying complexity) such as in *Excuse me, where is the train station?*¹⁵ According to the account in (34), those more complex elements target the same feature [Wx] by reducing the degree of imposition of asking the question. According to the proposed framework of social syntax, they are thus an integral part of the structure—similar to the particles discussed above—and are therefore analyzed as overt realizations in the specifier of SocP and not as paratactic configurations:



I would like to end this paper by referring back to a still open issue that I have mentioned at the outset of our discussion (Section 2). Specifically, one of the most prominent examples of the proposed principle ‘maximize politeness’ are probably forms such as *Can you pass the salt?*—famously known as ‘indirect speech acts’ (Searle 1975). Up to now, there has been only one formal syntactic proposal that has mentioned this type of utterances at all. In the context of distinguishing between

¹⁵ Note that this does not only hold for questions. For instance, an assertion such as (i) would probably be odd when uttered out-of-the-blue, and one would rather choose the version in (ii) that ‘invites’ the addressee more politely to accept *p*:(i) *The file has been stolen.*(ii) *Did you know that the file has been stolen?*

C(ause) T(ype) and ILL(ocutionary Force), [Coniglio and Zegrean \(2012\)](#) propose that the left periphery of the clause must contain two relevant distinct syntactic projections to account for cases such as *Can you pass the salt?* Observe their example and the relevant syntactic representation ([Coniglio and Zegrean 2012: 446](#)):

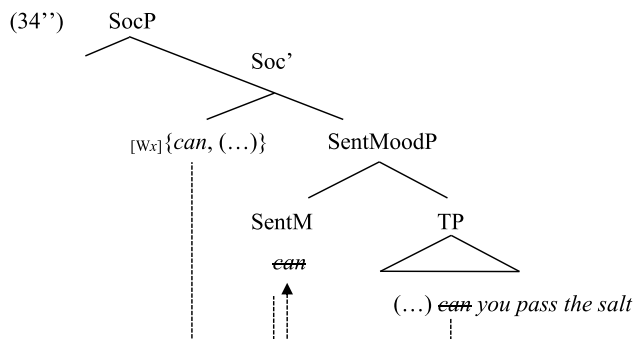
(35) a. Could you close the window, please? (#Yes, I could.)

ILL = directive (requesting an action); CT = interrogative

b. [ILL [CT ... [TP...]]]

However, as we have seen in this paper, the relevant notion might not be the mere Force of an utterance, but rather how an utterance is tailored towards social constellations and thus preferred or non-preferred in a situation that is governed by socio-economic principles of communication. Obviously, *Can you pass the salt?* is more polite (and hence the default version according to our account) than *Give me the salt!* Given what we have said above about the effect of different linguistic forms on the weightiness of face-threatening acts such as performing a request, we can again analyze this effect as a reduction of the degree of imposition: If the addressee can do *x*, then it is obviously a low imposition request.

The remaining question now is whether we would like to categorize the form *Can you VP* as a case of pragmatically inferred politeness ('if you can, then please do *x*'). This would be the classical 'indirect' approach. Alternatively, some more recent theories have suggested that this syntactic form is simply a case of ambiguity between an ability question and a polite request ([Lepore and Stone 2014](#)), without pragmatic inferences at play. The middle ground between both approaches is maybe the notion of 'natural convention' that has been put forward by [Simons and Zollman \(2019\)](#) for cases such as *Can you VP*, which claims that *Can you VP* is conventionalized as a polite request, but has developed into this form-meaning correspondence on a natural and Gricean path of pragmaticalization. In sum, this discussion boils down to the question whether we would like to view *Can you VP* as a conventionalized request syntax where the reading of the ability question is maybe not even present anymore in the minds of contemporary English speakers. If so, then the morphosyntax of asking about ability (in English via the ability modals *can* or *could*) has pragmaticalized into a marker of politeness in requests. Accordingly, we could analyze such cases as consecutive head movement of the ability modal to SentM^0 (to mark the clause type INT) and, subsequently, to Soc^0 to check the feature [Wx] because, in addition to clause typing, subject-auxiliary inversion in those cases also indicates a low imposition request by referring to the addressee's ability, see already our discussion above.



Again, I repeat that this final suggestion depends on how we categorize *Can you VP* in terms of different types of linguistic conventions in the first place. Overall, the case of *Can you VP* points to a much broader domain of research that concerns the diachronic development and installment of the principle 'maximize politeness'. If we assume a development of increasing so-called 'tentative' politeness in our (Western) societies and thus in languages like English ([Jucker 2020](#)), we can expect that politeness marking—also by means of morphosyntax—will become even richer in our grammars. This is why I believe that the program of social syntax sketched in this paper could have some interesting domains of future applications.

Let me summarize the main points of this paper. I have suggested to rethink our notion of canonical versions of a speech act by proposing a notion of canonicity according to which those speech acts are the canonical versions which are pragmatically unmarked, meaning that they can be used in a less restricted set of situations. Once we adopt this notion of canonicity, we can say that the more polite versions of any speech act are less restricted than the impolite (or ambiguous) forms. Politeness is thus the default in a socio-pragmatic perspective on speech acts. I have detailed the notion of politeness by adopting some distinctions from the functional literature, according to which the weightiness of any face-threatening act (in our context: speech act) can be measured along three dimensions: social distance, power, and the degree to which the respective act is considered an imposition. Section 3 has presented three case studies on German particles that are all contributing to reducing the degree of imposition of their respective speech act, thus having the effect of politeness in each of those speech acts. Accordingly, these versions including the relevant particles can be considered the unmarked and canonical

versions of performing the respective speech acts. The final part of this paper has sketched cases where the other dimensions of the weightiness of face-threatening acts—social distance and power—become relevant, and I have proposed a syntactic analysis that unifies our encoding of the social dimension of meaning in grammar.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Andreas Trotzke: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

I declare that with the submission of my paper *Towards a social syntax* I have no known competing financial interest or personal relationship that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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