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**Defining your P's and Q's:**  
**describing and prescribing politeness in dictionaries**

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## Defining your P's and Q's: describing and prescribing politeness in dictionaries

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Linguistic and lexicographical discussions of prescriptivism tend to focus on the *proscriptive*: warning users that particular words are non-standard or impolite. Where words are promoted, they are often the standard-variety alternatives of proscribed forms (e.g. “say *regardless* instead of *irregardless*”). Politeness markers offer a different kind of prescription to consider, since they are encouraged—and one might say proscribed—without reference to related proscribed forms that a dictionary could warn against. While we might not be congratulated for using polite words, we may be judged or corrected when we omit them. From a very young age, English-speakers hear: “Say *sorry* to your brother.” “What’s the magic word?” “I didn’t hear a *thank you*.” Though we are not told what these words mean (Gleason and Weintraub 1976), we are scolded when their use doesn’t sound sincere. Into adulthood, we are advised to “always say *please* and *thank you*.” One article on thanking continues the message: “And by always, I mean EVERY SINGLE TIME anything involves another person helping you out” (Allan 2017). Prescriptions don’t come much more prescriptive than that, and yet these words tend to be overlooked in discussions of linguistic prescriptions.

This article considers how *please*, *thank*\* (i.e. *thank you* and *thanks*), and *sorry* are treated in English monolingual dictionaries and ways in which norms concerning their use are in any sense described or promoted by dictionaries.

Promotion of polite usage may involve simply describing those usages as “polite” or more subtle phrasings in a definition or usage note. Before approaching those issues, the next sections consider problems for generalizing about politeness at a lexical

level, introduce the range of dictionaries and entries included in this study, and review the extent to which these words and their interactional senses are included in English dictionaries.

### **WHAT IS POLITE? CAN A DICTIONARY SAY?**

Theoretical accounts of politeness often note that “politeness does not reside in particular behaviours or linguistic forms, but rather in *evaluations* of behaviours and linguistic forms” (Kádár and Haugh 2013, 57). Nevertheless, expressions such as *please*, *thank\**, and *sorry* are stereotyped as “polite words” because some of their uses do interactional work that shows the speaker’s intention to be polite. A useful way to think of the politeness of lexical expressions comes from Marina Terkourafi’s (2005, 2015, *inter alia*) frame-based account of politeness, which notes the regularity of co-occurrence of certain expressions and certain types of contexts. “Politeness resides, not in linguistic expressions themselves, but in the regularity of this co-occurrence” (2005, 248). *Sorry*, for instance, is polite to say when bumping into someone *because* it is what we’re used to hearing in accidental person-bumping situations. While not every utterance of *please*, *thank\**, or *sorry* is intended or interpreted as polite, in the absence of evidence of impoliteness, rational interlocutors interpret these words as enacting conventional politeness. A good lexicographical description of the contributions of interactional words like these must include information about form, contexts, functions, and the social perlocutionary effect that uttering the word might have: that is, whether the hearer is likely to consider the speaker polite or impolite for having said it.

Each of the expressions considered here has become an “expression of procedural meaning” through pragmaticalization of more denotative expressions

(Watts 2003, 177ff). Consider the journey from *I am sorry* ‘I feel sorrow’ to the courteous utterance of *sorry* when a waiter reaches in front of one customer to give something to another. The interjective *sorry* is reduced in form, agrammatical, and bleached of its denotative meaning (‘feeling sorrow’), functioning to acknowledge and possibly try to repair a deviation from the ideal norm for physical interaction. Where contexts and functions co-vary, polysemy of the lexical form arises. So, (particularly in British English) *sorry* conventionally expresses ‘please let me past you’ or ‘please repeat what you just said’ in different contexts. These uses are related to *sorry* as an expression of apology, but further bleached of emotional content and linked to specific contexts. This raises the question whether or to what extent dictionary entries should separate out such uses.

The nature of polite words makes them particularly available for sarcastic mock politeness (Leech 1983, Culpeper 1996), as in utterances like “Thanks for stepping on my toe. I didn’t need that one anyway!” Since irony applies at the utterance level, rather than the lexical level, accounting for possible ironic usages is beyond the remit of a dictionary definition. But ironic usages can become conventionalized as well—sometimes through association with a particular form, sometimes through association with a particular context. For example, the form *Thanks a lot!* has become associated with sarcastic intention in some Englishes in a way that *Thanks very much!* hasn’t. The impolite use of *please* to reject an interlocutor’s claims has come to be associated with a break in the initial consonant cluster, often represented in print as *puh-lease*. While those forms recognizably deviate from *thanks* and *please*, they also depend on (and create) particular kinds of contexts and perform different functions in them. *Puh-lease* follows a claim and dismisses it. *Thanks a lot!* follows an action by the addressee that has negatively

affected the speaker and communicates a negative emotion. In these cases, the form-context pairing is conventionally impolite and non-compositionally so. (That is, there is nothing inherent to *a lot* that makes *thanks a lot* apt to be interpreted as more impolite than *thanks*.) Such non-compositional form-function combinations are precisely the sort of information that a dictionary should record, but because they can be multi-word expressions or involve paralinguistic variation from the “polite” use (e.g. lengthening, intonation), they might be overlooked in traditional lexicography.

There are further important questions beyond what can be covered here. First, what does the dictionary user think politeness is for? If use of a word is described as “polite” in a dictionary, is it normal behavior or the icing on top? Is it formality or kindness? Is it for all contexts and interlocutors or just some? Depending on the cultural background of the dictionary user, interpretations of *polite* could vary significantly. The dictionary’s own definition of *polite* might need consideration. Second, and given these problems, to what extent can we generalize about norms-of-politeness for a language as widely used as English?

Arguably, the less we can generalize, the less should be prescribed. While advice like “always say *please* and *thank you*” is easy to find, it is best not taken and best for dictionaries not to give it, since invariable use of the words would mark one out as a weird kind of English speaker. Floyd et al. (2018) found that British English speakers verbally acknowledged receipt of objects more than the seven non-English-speaking cultures they studied. Still, verbal gratitude was expressed in only 14.5% of the British object-receipt contexts—far from “always.”

Among English-speaking cultures and subcultures, norms vary as well. Biber et al. (1999), for instance, found twice as much *please* and four times as much *sorry* in spoken British English as American, and twice as much *thank\** in American as in

British. These differences in frequency reflect differences in how the words are typically used in those cultures. For instance, Murphy 2015 studied *please* in the GloWBE corpus (Davies 2013) and found that impolite uses of *please* (e.g. to dismiss another's argument) accounted for a larger proportion of American usage than British. Murphy and De Felice's (2019) study of corporate email communication found *please* in only 27% of American requests and 55% of British ones because British *please* is more apt to occur with low- or no-imposition imperatives and interrogatives (*Please let me know, Please find attached*), which are high in frequency. In American English, *please* usage seems to be more influenced by factors such as the interlocutors' relationship and the nature of the imposition (cf. Ervin-Tripp 1976). If dictionaries do in some ways promote the use of "polite" words, then a question is whether they are promoting them in line with the usage in a particular culture. This, in turn, raises questions for internet-based lexicographical products and their role in English-language teaching and learning. Depending on one's social position and the context of communication, overuse of *please*, *thank\**, or *sorry* has the potential to come off as overly supplicant, imperious, or self-regarding.

Dictionaries thus shouldn't instruct users to "always say *please* and *thank you*". So what can they do? And what do they do?

## DATA COLLECTION

This study is limited to *please*, *thank\**, and *sorry*, which serve as archetypical examples of "polite words." Since they are (more or less) words, they are more likely to be found in dictionaries than more complex politeness moves like *I beg your pardon* or *how do you do?* In the case of *thank\**, both **thank you** and **thanks** entries are considered, since dictionaries differ in which they treat. For *sorry*, some

dictionaries gave **I'm sorry** as a (or the) politeness form, and that variant is included here. I only considered treatment of the usages of those words that do interactional (rather than denotational) work. That is to say, I did not analyze definitions that relate to the verb *please* (*The results pleased her*), uses of *thank\** that are not addressing the thanks to the interlocutor (*They thanked us for coming, Thanks to new technology...*), nor strictly denotational uses the adjective *sorry* (*a sorry state of affairs*).

Denotational noun senses that refer to the commission of related speech acts (e.g., *They said their thanks*) are noted but not analyzed further. Both polite (*Please may I have some more*) and non-polite (*Oh, please! You've got to be kidding!*) interactional uses were considered.

Screenshots of the entries for these words in thirteen online English dictionaries were taken in March–April 2019 by a paid student assistant, and supplemented in May 2019 after items were found to be missing because they had been covered under different headwords (e.g. **sorry** > **I'm sorry**). These entries were analyzed for the range of functions covered, the form and content of explanation, and grammatical and usage information.

The thirteen dictionaries are listed in table 1. They are divided into traditional monolingual dictionaries (TDs) and learner dictionaries (LDs), and further divided by country of origin, United Kingdom or United States. Categorizing these dictionaries is complicated by their online formats and internet audiences. A single URL often leads to a range of dictionaries of different types, with entries listed one under the other or offered as options in drop-down menu or tabs. Some sites default to showing learner definitions, some to non-learner, and some sources from one country at least nominally offer entries for the other country's variety of English. The principles for inclusion here are:

- Where a publisher presents both learner and non-learner options (at the same or different URLs), both are usually included. The one exception is the Cambridge Dictionary site. Its default offering is from their *Advanced Learners Dictionary*, but it also offers a “Learner” option that (for the words I’ve searched) is identical to their “Essential American English” option, *Webster’s Essential Mini Dictionary*. This “mini” dictionary has so little information as to be incomparable to the other sources, so it is not included.
- Where a UK site offers an American dictionary option (or vice versa), the secondary national content is excluded if it is identical to the primary content on the site or if it reproduces entries from another dictionary covered here. Collins’ American offering reproduces *Webster’s New World* (4<sup>th</sup> edition), so it is included here, as a US TD.

The rightmost column in table 1 gives further information on the relationships between dictionaries at a single URL.

**Table 1** Online dictionaries searched (see references list for URLs)

Type	Dictionary	Notes
UK traditional (UK TD)	<i>Chambers 21st Century Dictionary (Chambers)</i>	Entries have the same layout as the 1999 print edition.
	<i>Collins English Dictionary/British (Collins)</i>	Not the default option on Collins site (see: <i>COBUILD</i> ).
	<i>Oxford Dictionaries Online (ODO)</i>	US option excluded (identical to UK).
US traditional (US TD)	<i>American Heritage Dictionary (AHD)</i>	Content from 5 <sup>th</sup> print edition (2011).
	<i>Dictionary.com</i>	Based on <i>Random House Unabridged Dictionary</i> . <i>Collins</i> and <i>Online Etymology Dictionary</i> material excluded.
	<i>Merriam-Webster.com (MW)</i>	
	<i>Webster's New World College Dictionary (WNW)</i>	US option on the Collins site. Taken from 4 <sup>th</sup> edition (1999).
UK learner (UK LD)	<i>Cambridge English (Cambridge)</i>	<i>Advanced Learner's Dictionary</i> option (default offering).
	<i>Collins COBUILD Dictionary (COBUILD)</i>	The default offering on the Collins site.
	<i>Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE)</i>	
	<i>Macmillan Dictionary (Macmillan)</i>	US option excluded (identical to UK).
	<i>Oxford Learner's Dictionaries (OLD)</i>	<i>Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary</i> content. US option excluded (identical to UK).
US learner (US LD)	<i>Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary (MWLD)</i>	

**A note on terminology** In this analysis, *sense* refers to a lexicographical entity rather than a semantic one—i.e. information listed as a separate (possibly numbered) definition in a dictionary entry. Since interactional words arguably have no semantic sense, *use* or *function* is used when referring to the contributions of the “polite” words to an utterance or discourse. (Nevertheless, I refer to the multiplicity of these functions as *polysemy*.) *Definition* here refers to the main part of a sense (sub)entry that describes the word’s meaning or function, excluding labels and usage notes. *Explanation* includes the definitions and/or usage notes for a particular word or sense, where both are considered together.

## COVERAGE OF “POLITE” WORDS

The interactional functions of the words under consideration are now more frequent than their etymologically prior denotational senses. For example, in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, Davies 2008–), adverbial *please* occurs about six times more than the verb *please*, even though 80% of the corpus consists of published writing rather than spoken interaction. Even the academic sub-corpus of COCA (the sub-corpus with the least adverbial *please*) has 2.6 times as many adverbial *pleases* as verbal ones. Of over 125,000 instances of the *thank* verb lemma in COCA, 87% are the bare form *thank* followed by *you*.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the frequency of the interactional uses, they are not reliably defined in traditional English monolingual dictionaries, and in American TDs in particular. Some dictionaries clearly favor representing denotational senses over interactional functions. For instance *WNW*'s entry for **please** includes four (non-polite) verb senses, but restricts its description of interactional *please* to a usage note at the end of the entry, (1):

(1) **USAGE:**

*Please* is also used for politeness in requests or commands to mean ‘be obliging enough to’ [*please sit down*]

*WNW*'s usage note is not much different from other dictionaries' definitions for ‘polite request’ *please*, but usage-note treatment hinders explanation of the word in that: (a) no grammatical information (other than what can be gleaned from the example) is given, and (b) there is formatting pressure to ignore other non-denotational functions—that is, though it's conventional for an entry to have numbered sense subentries, it's not normal for it to have multiple usage notes relating

to different uses that are not treated in sense definitions. In a similar vein, *MW* gives two denotational noun senses for *thanks*, but discusses its politeness functions in a usage note, rather than treating it as a separate sense and identifying its grammatical status.

*Dictionary.com* finds a midway point between usage description and definition, giving information about interactional uses within parentheses, in line with how it treats usage information generally. But it does so in sense-definition format, thus giving space for grammatical information and potentially allowing for multiple senses (though it gives only one for each word):

(2) **sorry**

*interjection*

6 (used as a conventional apology or expression of regret):

*Sorry, you're misinformed. Did I bump you? Sorry.*

For *sorry*, most dictionaries describe its use as an apology, often fitting this into definition of its adjective form, as in (3).<sup>2</sup>

(3) **sorry**

*adjective*

1. full of sorrow, pity, or sympathy: also used as an expression of apology or mild regret. (*WNW*; no examples given for this sense)

But where there is no direct mention of apology, it's sometimes unclear that (*I'm*) *sorry* is used as one. *MW*'s first adjectival sense for **sorry** ostensibly describes the meaning in *I'm sorry*: "feeling sorrow, regret, or penitence." This gives no indication that *sorry* might be used on its own or that *I'm sorry* is a conventional apology, not just a statement of the speaker's emotion.

*Thank you* falls through the lexicographical cracks for several TDs, probably because it is not an orthographical word. Nevertheless, it is an excellent example of the type of orthographical phrase that *should* be treated as a lexical item in a dictionary, since it is high-frequency, highly conventionalized, and non-compositional (i.e., while its verb-initial form suggests an imperative, it is no such thing). Though *AHD*, *Dictionary.com*, and *MW* do not treat *thank you* as a headword or run-on, they have entries for the hyphenated form **thank-you**, presented as a noun (as in *said their thank-yous*) or adjective (*thank-you notes*). That is, these US TDs define a denotational sense of *thank-you* that is derived from the politeness marker that they don't define. In some of their definitions, it's hard to tell if the intention is to define the interactional use or the denotative sense. For example, *AHD*'s definition in (4) ("an expression of gratitude") might be seen as a treatment of the polite usage *thank you*, but the example confirms the 'mention' interpretation. *MW*'s definition is much the same, but lacks the clarifying example.

(4) **thank-you**

*n.* An expression of gratitude: *said their thank-yous and departed* (*AHD*)

*Dictionary.com* uses the two-word form *thank you* in the definition of the hyphenated form, but has no entry for *thank you*:

(5) **thank-you**

*adjective*

2. an expression of thanks, as by saying "thank you": *I never got so much as a thank-you for helping him.* (*Dictionary.com*)

These US TDs have entries for **thanks** and note its informality, but do not offer *thank you* as the more formal alternative.

Overall, the LDs are far superior in including these words in their ‘polite’ functions. *ODO* and *Collins* have better coverage than the US TDs, which might be seen as an effect of their publishers’ engagement in LD production and (relatedly) corpus-heavy methods. Generally, treatment of politeness markers suffers in TDs because they pay less attention to:

- words that do not fit easily into traditional grammatical categories (in contrast, they cover noun, verb and adjective uses of the same words well)
- spoken English
- multi-word lexical items.

### COVERAGE OF POLYSEMY

While *please*, *thank\**, and *sorry* have been called *polite words* or *politeness markers*, they are more generally interactional words, since they can also be used for non-polite functions, including emphasis (*Would you PLEASE shut up?!*) and non-polite dismissal (*Oh please, get over yourself; Sorry, but that’s stupid*). Even in polite use, each has different discernable functions associated with particular contexts.

Dictionaries differ markedly in their coverage of this variation.

Tables 2–4 show the ranges of functions explicitly defined for *please*, *thank\**, and *sorry*, respectively. Each numbered row in each table represents a function that at least one dictionary has marked with a separate, numbered (or bullet-pointed) sense or subsense. The rightmost column lists the dictionaries that include each function in some way. Parentheses indicate the “lumping” of that function within a sense-entry in which another function was listed first. For example, the *Chambers* sense definition for **please** “used politely to accompany a request, order, acceptance of an offer...” is primarily counted as including the polite-request function, but secondarily (in

parentheses) counted as including the polite-acceptance function (which other dictionaries treated as a separate sense, as indicated by the lack of parentheses). Square brackets [ ] indicate that the function is treated in a usage note, rather than in a separate sense subentry. For the purposes of these tables, orthographic and grammatical variants offered by some dictionaries (e.g. **Please!** with punctuation; the phrase **I'm sorry**) are considered together with the unadorned form. For *thank\** in table 3, where a dictionary includes both **thank you** and **thanks**, the more thorough entry of the two is considered here. (The less complete entry is usually a cross-reference to the other.)

**Table 2** Function coverage and sense division for *please*

		Dictionary coverage
<b>Polite uses</b>		
1	used to add politeness to a request that the addressee do something <i>Could everyone please stand?</i>	TD: all LD: <i>Cambridge, COBUILD, LDOCE, (Macmillan), (OLD), (MW), [WNW]</i>
2	used to add politeness to a request for permission or for something <i>May I have one, please?</i>	TD: ( <i>Chambers</i> ) LD: ( <i>Cambridge</i> ), <i>LDOCE, Macmillan, OLD, MW</i>
3	used to politely accept an offer <i>Cake? —Yes, please.</i>	TD: ( <i>Chambers</i> ), <i>ODO, AHD, MW</i> LD: all
4	used to politely accede to a request <i>May I sit here? —Please do.</i>	TD: <i>ODO</i> LD: ( <i>COBUILD</i> )
5	used as a polite call for attention <i>Please, Miss!</i>	TD: ( <i>Chambers</i> ) LD: <i>Cambridge, COBUILD, LDOCE</i>
<b>Emphatic/urgent/emotive uses</b>		
6	used to add force/urgency to a request (etc.) <i>Please shut up already!</i>	TD: ( <i>Collins</i> ), <i>ODO, (MW)</i> LD: <i>Cambridge, Macmillan, OLD, MWLD</i>
7	used to express disapproval of a behavior or to mean ‘Stop it!’ <i>Dana, please!</i>	TD: <i>ODO</i> LD: <i>COBUILD, LDOCE, Macmillan, OLD</i>
8	used to express incredulity at or dismissal of a statement <i>Oh, please. No one believes that.</i>	GD: <i>Collins, ODO, MW</i> LD: <i>LDOCE, Macmillan, OLD, MWLD</i>

**Table 3** Function coverage and sense division for *thank*\*

		Dictionary coverage
<b>Polite uses</b>		
1	Used to express gratitude for or acknowledgement of an object or action. <i>Thanks for coming.</i>	TD: all: [ <i>MW</i> ] in usage note only LD: all
2	Used to accept (or, with <i>no</i> , to refuse) an offer <i>Cake? Ooh, thank you!</i>	TD: (? <i>Chambers</i> ), ( <i>ODO</i> ) LD: all
3	Used in or as an answer to a polite question or remark <i>How are you? —Fine, thank you</i> <i>Nice shoes! —Thanks.</i>	TD: none LD: <i>Cambridge</i> , <i>COBUILD</i> , <i>LDOCE</i> , ( <i>Macmillan</i> ), [ <i>OLD</i> ]
<b>Emphatic/urgent/emotive uses</b>		
4	(in final position) used to emphasize rejection or disapproval. <i>That'll be enough, thank you!</i>	TD: none LD: all

**Table 4** Function coverage and sense division for *sorry* †

functions		Dictionary coverage
1	Used to express regret for own action <i>Sorry I'm late.</i>	TD: ( <i>Dictionary.com</i> ), [ <i>?MW</i> ], ( <i>WNW</i> ) LD: ( <i>Cambridge</i> ), <i>COBUILD</i> , <i>LDOCE</i> , <i>Macmillan</i> , <i>MWLD</i>
2	Used to request forgiveness <i>Sorry, can you ever forgive me?</i>	TD: all but <i>MW</i> LD: <i>Cambridge</i> , <i>COBUILD</i> , <i>Macmillan</i> , <i>OLD</i> , <i>MWLD</i>
3	Used to express condolence <i>Sorry for your loss.</i>	TD: none LD: ( <i>Cambridge</i> ), <i>COBUILD</i>
4	Used to politely interrupt another speaker <i>Sorry, but can I just say...</i>	TD: none LD: <i>Macmillan</i> , <i>MWLD</i>
5	Used to request repetition of addressee's last utterance <i>Sorry? What was that?</i>	TD: <i>Chambers</i> , <i>ODO</i> , <i>AHD</i> LD: <i>COBUILD</i> , <i>LDOCE</i> , <i>Macmillan</i> , <i>MWLD</i>
6	Used as a self-correction mechanism <i>I counted 12—sorry 13—geese.</i>	TD: none LD: <i>Cambridge</i> , <i>COBUILD</i> , <i>LDOCE</i> , <i>Macmillan</i> , <i>MWLD</i>
7	Used to politely introduce disagreement <i>Sorry, but that can't be true.</i>	TD: none LD: all (( <i>MWLD</i> ) lumps with sense 4)
8	Used to introduce bad news <i>Sorry, your ticket isn't valid.</i>	TD: none LD: ( <i>COBUILD</i> ), <i>LDOCE</i> , <i>OLD</i> , ( <i>MWLD</i> )
9	Used to politely reject an offer or request <i>Sorry, I've got practice then.</i>	TD: none LD: ( <i>Cambridge</i> ), <i>LDOCE</i> , ( <i>OLD</i> )

† Functions 1 and 2 are very difficult to distinguish in examples, but they are treated separately here because some dictionaries separated them.

Learner dictionaries have more elaborate treatment of the multiple functions of these words. This is not surprising since (a) LDs aim to serve users who have not experienced enough natural interaction in English to have gained an implicit knowledge of when to (not) use these words, and (b) many LDs rely heavily on corpus evidence, which makes the words' polysemy more apparent. Fine-grained splitting of functions into multiple sense entries is particularly useful for LD users because those functions might not map to a single word in the learner's L1. In that case, the learner is less likely than the native speaker to see the connection between, say, using *please* to request something and using *please* to accept an offer. (See Ferguson 1976 for a discussion of the different Arabic words that map to English *please*, for example.)

LDs are particularly good at covering the functions that are further away from their stereotyped "polite" uses, including:

- the non-polite 'urgent' use of *please* (treated as a separate sense in four of the six LDs but only one of the seven TDs: table 2, sense 6)
- the dismissive use of *thank\** (all LDs, no TDs: table 3, sense 4)
- ritual uses of the words, such as *thank\** as a response in certain adjacency pairs (table 3, sense 3)
- interaction-management functions of the words (e.g. the self-corrective *sorry*, table 4, sense 6).

Table 5 gives another way to view coverage of polysemy, indicating the *average* number of functions explicitly defined or discussed per word in three lexicographical traditions: UK traditional, US traditional, and learner dictionaries.<sup>3</sup> That is, given the information in the senses (lumped or split) and usage notes, how many of the functions described in tables 2–4 are covered in each dictionary type?

The percentage figures indicate, on average, how much of each word's functional range (i.e. the maximum numbers of senses, as listed in tables 2–4) is considered in each dictionary type.<sup>4</sup> LDs cover more range than TDs, and American TDs cover the least of all.

**Table 5** Average coverage of politeness marker functions by dictionary type

Dictionary type	<i>please</i> (max=8)	<i>thank*</i> (max=4)	<i>sorry</i> (max=8)
UK TD (n=3)	4.3 (54%)	1.7 (43%)	1.7 (21%)
US TD (n=4)	2 (25%)	1 (25%)	1.5 (19%)
Learners (n=6)	5.5 (69%)	4 (100%)	5.7 (71%)

## DEFINING USAGE

Whether in sense definitions or in usage notes, the functions of these politeness markers are described by four means:

- (a) synonyms/paraphrases
- (b) noun-phrase-headed metalinguistic description: “an expression that...,” “a polite way of...”
- (c) pragmatic glosses, generally beginning with “used to/for/as/when...”
- (d) full-sentence definition.

Only definition-by-synonym (a) fulfills the lexicographic objective of providing a definition that can be substituted for the headword in context. For these words, the definitional synonyms are often phrases. For instance, *AHD* defines **please** with paraphrases, which are underscored in (6):

(6) **please**

*adv.*

1. If it is your desire or pleasure; If you please. Used in polite requests:

*Please stand back. Pay attention please.*

2. Yes. Used in polite affirmative replies to offers: *May I help you?*

*Please.* (AHD, underscore added)

Synonyms are generally not allowed to suffice as a definition for politeness markers (with the exception of cross-reference between **thanks** and **thank you** in one direction or the other). As seen in (6), synonym definitions are supported by pragmatic glosses.

The other three types are varieties of what Geeraerts (2003) calls *metalinguistic definition*. The NP-headed metalinguistic descriptions (type (b)), as in (7) and (8), appear to be attempts to define interactional words in much the same way as nouns are defined: with a hyperonym (underscored in the examples) and differentiating specifics.

(7) **thanks**

exclamation

3 *informal* an exclamation expressing acknowledgement, gratitude or appreciation (*Collins*, underscore added)

(8) **thank you** a polite expression acknowledging a gift, help or offer

(*Chambers*, run-on to **thank v.**, underscore added)

Though these NP-headed metalinguistic definitions have the same shape as noun definitions, they are not strictly the same. When **stapler** is defined as “a machine for fastening together sheets of paper...” (*Dictionary.com*), we understand that a stapler is a type of machine, and that *stapler* is an expression for a type of machine. The

metalinguistic level is not part of the definition: the definition describes a machine, not a word for a machine. The NP-headed metalinguistic definitions for *thank\** thus break two basic principles of defining, that the definition “must correspond to the part of speech of the word defined” and the “most essential elements of meaning come first” (Landau 1989, 124 and 132). The fact that *thanks* is an expression is not the most essential element of its meaning. While interjections are generally held to be an exception to the part-of-speech rule, there’s no particular reason here for breaking the essentials-first rule. Because such words can be also used as metalinguistic nouns (as in *We said our thank-yous*), defining their interactional uses in noun form creates ambiguity.

Pragmatic glosses are by far the most common type of explanation. They nearly always begin with the word *used*. (*Chambers’ sorry* is an exception, starting with *given*.) Three types of glosses can be identified, which roughly correspond with the words that follow *used*. Table 6 illustrates the types, showing the *used* phrases for the first interactional sense for **please** (i.e. not the verb), for those dictionaries that have a pragmatic gloss for it.

**Table 6.** Words following *used* in primary explanation of **please**

<b>Used as NP</b> <i>Hyperonym: what is it?</i>	
<i>Dictionary.com</i>	as a polite addition to requests, commands, etc.
<i>MW</i>	as a function word to express politeness or emphasis in a request
<i>Macmillan</i>	as a polite way of asking for something or of asking someone to do something
<i>OLD</i>	as a polite way of asking for something or telling somebody to do something
<b>Used in NP</b> <i>Context: where does it go?</i>	
<i>ODO</i>	in polite requests or questions
<i>AHD</i>	in polite requests
<b>Used to VP, Used in Gerund Phrase, Used for NP</b> <i>Action: what does it do?</i>	
<i>Chambers</i>	politely to accompany a request, order, acceptance of an offer, protest, a call for attention, etc.
<i>Collins</i>	in making polite requests
<i>WNW</i>	for politeness in requests or commands to mean “be obliging enough to”
<i>Cambridge</i>	to make a request more polite
<i>LDOCE</i>	to be polite when asking someone to do something
<i>MWLD</i>	to ask for something in a polite way

Those that start with *used as* in table 6 attempt a hyperonym (‘type of’) description, and so they are like the NP-headed metalinguistic definitions, but avoid the use/mention ambiguity. Those that begin with *used in* generally focus on the context in which the word is found. Those beginning *used to* mostly indicate the action achieved through the word’s use, as does the one case of *used in* followed by a gerund phrase (*Collins*) and *used for* (not evident in this sense of **please**, but found elsewhere). These explanatory formulae address different questions about the word, respectively: What is it? Where does it go? What does it do?

Prioritizing certain aspects of a word’s usage does not preclude presenting the others. For instance, the second *used as* example in table (*MW*) clearly gives all three types of information: what *please* is (“a function word”), where it occurs (“in a request”) and what it does (“express politeness or emphasis”).

However, the three aspects of these explanations are not equivalent in their usefulness, which can be represented as:

## Action &gt; Context &gt; (Hyperonym)

In other words, the most important information about interactional words like these is what they are intended to *do* as a part of the interaction. The hyperonym information is arguably unneeded, as indicated by the fact that that information is barely expressed in explanations that don't start with *used as*. Where *please* is explained with reference to context first, the explanations can be vague about the word's contribution. For instance, *AHD*'s "used in polite requests" does not indicate that *please* is a major contributor to that politeness. In addition to the *used+* formulae in table 6, some dictionaries/senses have *used when*, as in *OLD*'s definition for sense 1 of *I'm sorry* "used when you are apologizing for something." This indicates the context of use directly, but only indirectly (and ambiguously) indicates the action: that uttering *sorry* itself *is* the act of apology.

Full-sentence definition (FSD) is the particular approach of *COBUILD*. For denotational words, FSDs embed useful information about the word in the definition itself. For example, a definition that starts "A **brick** is..." gives information about countability and determiner use, while one that starts "If you **carry** something..." gives information about the grammatical relations of the verb that is more accessible to the lay reader than the use of technical terminology like *transitive* (Hanks 1987). The FSDs for interactional words do not show this benefit, since the words cannot be represented in their interactional context in the non-interactive definition, as shown in (9). The user must rely on examples later in the entry for information about where *please* might occur in a sentence.

(9) **please**

## 1. adverb

You say **please** when you are politely asking or inviting someone to do something.

[politeness] (*COBUILD*)

(10) **thank**

## 1. convention

You use **thank you** or, in more informal English, **thanks** to express your gratitude when someone does something for you or gives you what you want.

[formulae] (*COBUILD*)

(11) **sorry**

## 1. convention

You say ‘**Sorry**’ or ‘**I’m sorry**’ as a way of apologizing to someone for something that you have done which has upset them or caused them difficulties, or when you bump into them accidentally.

[formulae] (*COBUILD*)

These examples show that FSDs have much the same structure as pragmatic glosses, and similarly vary in terms of the usage information they prioritize: hyperonym in (11), context in (9), action in (10).

Table 7 summarizes the definition/explanation types for the first (or only) ‘polite’ sense of each word across the dictionaries. Action-prioritizing forms predominate, but there is little within-dictionary consistency across headwords, and no within-headword consistency across dictionaries.

**Table 7** Prioritized information in primary explanations for polite words

Dictionary	<i>please</i>	<i>thank*</i>	<i>sorry</i>
Chambers	A?	m	A?
<i>Collins</i>	A	m	m
<i>ODO</i>	C	m/C	A
<i>AHD</i>	s/C	A	A
<i>Dictionary.com</i>	H/s	H	H
<i>MW</i>	H	m/C	-
<i>WNW</i>	A	m	H
<i>Cambridge</i>	A	A	A
<i>COBUILD</i>	C	A	H
<i>LDOCE</i>	A	A	A
<i>Macmillan</i>	H	A	A
<i>OLD</i>	H	A	C
<i>MWLD</i>	A	H	A

**KEY**

m metalinguistic definition

s synonym definition

*used...*A Action (*used to...*)C Context (*used to...*)H Hyperonym (*used as...*)

In addition, there is very little consistency within entries within dictionaries.

For instance in the four senses for *please* in *COBUILD*, two prioritize context and two prioritize action; for two subsenses of *sorry* in *ODO*, one is *used to* and the other *used as*. The American TDs are the most internally consistent within entries (and to some degree across). For instance, *MW* has three senses for *please* all beginning “used as a function word” and *Dictionary.com* gives *used as* explanations for every interactional use of these headwords. One might ask if consistency is merely the proverbial hobgoblin of little minds, but it is not clear that stylistic variation (as in the *COBUILD* examples in (9)–(11)) adds any information. Where the variation happens within an entry, it looks like a writerly attempt to avoid repetitive structures. For instance, *LDOCE*’s treatment of **thanks** in (12), the three senses prioritize action, hyperonym, and context information, respectively.

(12) **thanks**<sup>1</sup> *interjection informal*

**1** used to tell someone that you are grateful for something they have given you or done for you SYN **thank you**

‘Pass the salt, please ... thanks.’

[phrasal run-ons]

**2** used as a polite way of accepting something that someone has offered you

‘Do you want another coffee?’ ‘Oh, thanks.’

**3** *spoken* used when politely answering someone’s question (*LDOCE*)

‘Hi, Bill, how are you?’ ‘Fine, thanks.’

Sense 3 in particular would be less ambiguous if phrased in the same way as sense 1 or 2, respectively: “used to express politeness when answering a question” or “used as a polite addition when answering a question”. (Clearer still might be the paraphrase “Thanks for asking.” Note also that synonym cross-reference to **thank you** is only given for the first sense, though it applies to all.) While varying sentence structures aids readability in paragraphed prose, it can distract from the issues at hand in a dictionary entry.

### **SHOULD THE READER USE THESE EXPRESSIONS?**

Returning to the question of norms and prescriptions: dictionaries don’t mark politeness markers with anything as explicit as “use this word!”—nor should they.

But since these are interactional words whose appropriateness to context varies, some information about that appropriateness is central to describing their usage.

Dictionaries have capacity to weigh in on the words' social appropriateness in at least three aspects of the entry:

- usage labels
- use of value-laden words in the word's explanation
- personification in the explanation.

The differences in how these are used for “polite” words and “rude” words are interesting.

For *please*, *thank\**, and *sorry*, very few usage labels are found in the thirteen dictionaries. Aside from headword-level marking of **thanks** as INFORMAL (as in (12)), labels are only found in LDs and are applied at the sense level: SPOKEN for some particularly interactional senses (e.g. in *LDOCE* for **thanks** sense 3 in (12)), INFORMAL (*LDOCE* and *OLD* for non-polite **please** senses: table 2, senses 7, 8), and OFTEN HUMOROUS (*OLD* for ‘stop it’ **please**: table 2, sense 7). Since LDs cover more of the non-polite senses of these words (see tables 2–4), it is not surprising that they have more labels for those senses.

The only dictionary that offers something like a POLITE label is *COBUILD*, in which a bracketed label [politeness] follows two senses of *please* (table 2, senses 1—see (9)—and 4, which is also marked [mainly British]). Why some senses have the [politeness] label and others do not is unclear, since not all ‘polite’ senses of **please** have it and no senses of **thank you** or **sorry** do (cf. (10) and (11) where the only label is [formulae]). In a similarly irregular fashion, *COBUILD* applies the labels [feelings] and [emphasis] to other senses of these words. These labels to some degree replace the PRAGMATICS label that appeared against senses in the right margin of the print version (*COBUILD* 1995), which referred the reader to an essay about pragmatic entries in the dictionary's front matter. The bracketed labels in the web version are not

hyperlinks, and neither the pragmatics essay nor the explanation of the labels are available on the website.

In contrast, usage labels are dictionaries' primary means of giving usage information about "rude" words and their senses, whether denotational (as in (13) and (14)) or non-denotational ((15) and (16)). *Macmillan* often doubles up this information, giving it as a label and in the definition ((14) and (16)), especially where the word is considered especially offensive.

(13) **retard** *noun* [C] OFFENSIVE

a stupid or mentally slow person (*Cambridge*)

(14) **retard** NOUN [COUNTABLE] OFFENSIVE

**1** an offensive word for someone who has not developed mentally as much as most other people of the same age (*Macmillan*)

(15) **shit**

7. exclamation

**Shit** is used to express anger, impatience, or disgust.

[*informal, rude*] (*COBUILD*)

(16) **fuck** INTERJECTION OFFENSIVE

an extremely offensive expression used for showing anger or surprise

(*Macmillan*)

The italics in *COBUILD*'s bracketed labels in (15) differentiate these as registral labels, rather than pragmatics-type label seen for the polite words (Lisa Todd at HarperCollins, by email). This distinction is not explained on the website, but it's also questionable whether a register/pragmatics distinction is worth making or which side of that divide "politeness" falls, since particular contexts call for a polite register.

In the absence of usage labels for the “polite” words, usage information is typically found within the explanation itself. We’ve seen examples already: the word *polite* in definitions in (6), (8), and (12) and *informal* in (10). The inclusion of this label-like information in the definitions is a factor in the form of the definitions. The information that an expression effects politeness is easily expressed using the adjective *polite* in pragmatic glosses that prioritize hyperonym or context information. The action-prioritizing glosses (as in (19)) require adverbial *politely*, as shown in these hypothetical definitions for the ‘acceptance’ sense of *thank\** (table 3, sense 2).

(17) Hyperonym: used as a polite way to accept an offer

(18) Context: used in a polite acceptance of an offer

(19) Action: used to politely accept an offer

*or* used to accept an offer politely

The adoption of the wordy hyperonym style or the ambiguous context-driven style may be encouraged by the fact that these styles are noun-headed, and therefore offer a convenient and early place for the word *polite*. To put *politely* in a verb-headed phrase ((19)) means either splitting the infinitive or putting this essential information at the end of the entry. If polite words were treated more like “rude” words, the information about politeness would be in a label, and the focus could be on the action, as in the hypothetical example (20).

(20) POLITE used to accept an offer

*Coffee? Yes, thank you.*

The last and most covert way that dictionaries might show approval (or not) of usage is in the pronouns used in explanations. All of the LDs (and none of the TDs) use second-person pronouns in at least some of their senses for these words, in order to refer to the user of the defined word. This is most clear and widespread in

*COBUILD*, where full-sentence definitions require a subject, thus “You use **please** when...” rather than “Used when...” (cf. (9)–(11)).

The *you* in these cases is presumably intended as an impersonal pronoun: less formal than *one*, shorter (and less confusing) than *someone*. If it is impersonal, then presumably it expresses a norm rather than a prescription; that is, not “you should say *please* when...” but “people generally say *please* when...” But comparing the “polite” senses of these words to their other senses and to controversial words reveals that presence and absence of impersonal *you* can betray the lexicographer’s attitude to usage.

Modality is one way to slightly temper the suggestion that it is normal or right for *you* to use a word in a particular way. While the most stereotypically polite functions of *please* (1, 2 in table 2) have *COBUILD* definitions starting with “You say **please**,” other senses begin with “You can say **please**,” as in (21), which also includes a tempered “You would”:

(21) **3** convention

You can say **please** to indicate that you want someone to stop doing something or stop speaking. You would say this if, for example, what they are doing or saying makes you angry or upset.

That is, you *can* say *please* to indicate that you want someone to stop talking, but you might not want to (because it might not be polite).

The impersonal *you* might not be entirely impersonal, as indicated by the fact that *COBUILD* uses third-person reference to word-users as well, in order to indicate some distance between the dictionary reader (and the lexicographer) and people who hold certain prejudices or act in unseemly ways. (22) shows that for **hopefully**, a mild case of usage controversy, *COBUILD* distinguishes between the *you* who uses the

word and *some careful speakers* who don't, implicitly giving the reader the okay to not be one of those careful speakers.

- (22) You say **hopefully** when mentioning something that you hope will happen. Some careful speakers of English think that this use of **hopefully** is not correct, but it is very frequently used. (*COBUILD*)

For rude words like *shit* (in (23)) and *asshole* (in (24)), it's not *you* who uses the word at all (unless you're speaking British English, in which case the regional note seems to command that you use *arsehole*). Later senses of **shit** in *COBUILD* have no personation (as in the passive phrasing of (15) above); the "otherness" of *shit*-sayers is established in sense 1, then assumed.

(23) **shit**

1. uncountable noun

Some people use **shit** to refer to solid waste matter from the body of a human being or animal.

[*informal, rude*]

(24) **asshole**

countable noun

If one person calls another person an **asshole**, they think that person is extremely stupid or has behaved in a stupid way.

[US, *rude*, disapproval]

**REGIONAL NOTE:**

In BRIT, use **arsehole**. (*COBUILD*)

In other dictionaries, impersonal *you* is not only used for only polite senses. For instance, most of the LDs use *you* in defining the 'dismissal' sense of *thank you* (table

3, sense 4) and the only *OLD* sense of **please** with *you* is an impolite sense with no usage labeling to indicate its informality or impoliteness:

- (25) 5 **Please/P-lease** used when you are replying to somebody who has said something that you think is stupid (*OLD*, **please**)

Nevertheless, defining with *you* can be seen as a way for the lexicographer to take a position on the norms of language usage, though it is considerably less direct than usage labeling. *COBUILD* in particular seems to exploit this possibility.

## CONCLUSIONS

Handbooks of lexicography are mostly (and understandably) concerned with how to define nouns and verbs. Many don't even have categories like *interjection* in their indices. (They certainly don't have *politeness*, though a few have *pragmatics*.) Where instructions for defining non-denotational words are given, they are rather paltry. As Atkins and Rundell put it they "need not detain us long" (2008, 447). Part of the reason for not worrying so much about these words is that they are generally high-frequency words, and, at least in the print age, both native-speaker and learner dictionary users were unlikely to look up common words (Svensén 2009, 466–467).

That doesn't mean that such words can be ignored, for their treatment could be important for at least three audiences. First, researchers need a good descriptive record of English. While description is often considered the job of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the *OED* has relatively little information on the uses of these words, perhaps because of its reliance on literary sources.<sup>5</sup> Second, automatic language-processing tasks require accurate representation of different functions of polite words (many of them not-so-polite) for tasks like identifying internet trolling. Finally, since one language's politeness markers often have no exact lexical equivalent in other

languages, and since these words affect how the speaker is received in interaction, they should be high-priority for learner dictionaries, which in their current electronic forms are more available for use as classroom and self-teaching tools. (Safant and Campoy 2002 make a similar point about using dictionaries to teach request formulae, but they note that EFL teacher-training needs to put more focus on dictionary skills so that teachers make the most of this resource.) As we've seen here, learner dictionaries generally rise to the challenge of describing polite forms in a way that the OED and TDs do not, making LDs a useful descriptive tool for all audiences.

Reviewing treatment of these words on the edge of lexicality<sup>6</sup> has shown that American TDs in particular may be too constrained by style sheets that try to fit interactional words into denotational styles of definition. As a result, some dictionaries prioritize denotational senses of the words, sometimes excluding interactional senses that are prior both in usage and in etymology.

Usage labels are typically used in dictionaries to disapprove (*offensive, rude*) or delimit (e.g. regional labels). Usage information is given within definitions of “polite” words, which means that the definition has to both explain what the word does (e.g. accept, apologize) and how it is likely to be received (politely, impolitely). These two aspects of the word overlap considerably—after all, part of what *please* does is to make a request polite. But in many cases, labeling a function as POLITE or DISAPPROVING or IMPATIENT might help to make the definition clearer by separating that emotive information from the conversational move the word achieves (“used to show disagreement,” “used to accept an offer”). Greater focus on the action committed with the word might encourage greater attention to the different functions these words have, possibly resulting in more sense elaboration or splitting.

Existing literature on treatments of pragmatics in (learner) dictionaries has generally had themes of lost opportunities (e.g. Nuccorini 1993, Safant and Campoy

2002, Yang 2007, Kawamura 2014). Inattention to interactional issues can be due to the often non-lexical nature of speech-act pragmatics and politeness, leading some to conclude that LDs need more “macro” elements relating to politeness that can be clicked through to (Yang 2007). Links to resources, such as essays on “how to make a request” or “how to apologize,” are found in a very small number of the LD entries studied here. One such case is in *Cambridge’s* page for **please**, which links to entries in *English Grammar Today* (Carter et al. 2016). Whether such links are helpful is the stuff for another article, but they are often not easy to find or use. For example, in the *Cambridge* case, the information is presented as additional “Grammar” information, and so it’s not clear before one clicks through that there is pragmatic information to be found.

The present survey shows that even if “dictionaries can and should only deal with most fixed parts of pragmatic meaning” (Kawamura 2014, 37), there’s still plenty for them to do when it comes to interactional words, since they embody relatively fixed pragmatic meanings. Learner dictionaries show more attention to a broader range of functions than TDs do, but their coverage of the contexts, actions, and perlocutionary effects of these functions can be irregular and indirect, not clearly indicating which senses might be better received than others. While they do a lot of things right, “learners’ dictionaries have to be unambiguous about social norms” (Moon 2016, 139). There is room to be more explicit, particularly through the use of a broader range of usage labels than are currently called upon.

I have not had the space here to consider other aspects of these words’ lexicographical treatment, but there are several. These words present problems for grammatical description, since they do not clearly fit into traditional part-of-speech categories: “Traditional grammars cannot deal with *please* at all, since by all syntactic

tests it is unique” (Stubbs 1983, 71). *COBUILD* ably dodges the part-of-speech issue by labeling some uses as CONVENTION.

I’ve also not been able to fully consider example sentences, which don’t always reflect typical usage (and occasionally exemplify senses other than those defined). For example, some dictionaries give several examples of *please* in imperatives, but none in some of its most likely contexts—e.g. in the middle of questions: *Could you please show me?* Some include several examples of one of the most marked [and dialectally variant] positions: at the start of questions: *Please may I go?*

Edwin Battistella (2009) compares etiquette guides to dictionaries and notes that both react ably to changing social norms. But since no one’s ever boycotted a publisher for its treatment of *please* or *thank you*, dictionaries have not taken the social norms of politeness as seriously as taboo or prescriptivist controversies. Learners of English in particular are far more likely to access a dictionary than an etiquette guide in trying to learn about how to be polite in English-speaking contexts. They are much better served by existing learner dictionaries than by traditional monolingual dictionaries. But given the online nature of most dictionaries today, there’s no reason why traditional dictionaries shouldn’t represent all of the kinds of information that LDs alone now provide about these “polite” words.

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<sup>1</sup> Though *please* can be used as an interjection, it is not coded as one in COCA. The verb search for *please\** included *please*, *pleased* (where it was parsed as a verb), and *pleases*, but not *pleasing* (because to search for *pleas\** included other verbs, like *pleasure* which would have created noise in this data. Instances of *thank you* in the corpus have been parsed as verb + object, and so it's not easy to differentiate *thank you* as an interjection from *I would like to thank you* and other longer forms, but in either case the phrase is being used to direct thanks to the interlocutor. A random sample of 200 instances of *thank you* in COCA included just four in which the *thank* was grammatically a verb. *Sorry* is harder to differentiate automatically, since all uses have been tagged as adjectives, and there is a judgement call to be made about whether instances of *I'm sorry* are apologies or not.

<sup>2</sup> I have only partially reproduced exemplar entries, leaving out phonetic, etymological and often grammatical information, and including only those senses that are relevant to the discussion at hand. (Sense numbering is preserved.)

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- <sup>3</sup> LDs are not divided into American and British variants, since (a) only one American LD is included, (b) US LDs have not had the opportunity to develop as a separate “tradition” (the groundwork was clearly laid by UK lexicographers), and (c) the numbers for *MWLD* are completely in line with the UK LD numbers.
- <sup>4</sup> Not included in table 5 are cases in which particular functions are present in the entry’s examples but not explicitly covered in the definition/usage note. There were only a couple of these in the studied dictionaries if we look only at the sense entries and not at the ‘more examples from the corpus’ expansions at the ends of entries in some dictionaries. Exemplification without explicit definition is a bigger problem for the OED, which suffers from a tendency toward minimal definition (for these words) plus ample and functionally divergent quotations.
- <sup>5</sup> As of May 2019, only *please* (2006) and *sorry* (2011) have been updated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (*OED Online*). *Thank* (noun and verb) has not been fully revised since 1912. Even the more current entries have little treatment of the words’ polysemy.
- <sup>6</sup> That interjections are “on the edge” of lexicality is illustrated nicely by the fact that they are treated as lexical words on page 164 of Atkins and Rundell 2008, and as grammatical words on page 447.