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## Gerne

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## Gerne\*

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*“gerne unterstütze ich Dich wie auch immer...”* Martin Prinzhorn, February 2016

The above is the beginning of an e-mail by Martin, which not only reflects his generosity in providing support to his students, even decades after his advisory duties have ended, but also struck a chord with an interesting grammatical property of the word *gerne*<sup>1</sup> which we have been discussing for a while and will now take up in this squib as a thank you to Martin. Martin has been significant in both authors’ linguistic paths and honoring his diverse and manifold contributions, we will explore the phenomenon from two perspectives, a grammatical and a pragmatic one.

One of the phenomena we address in this squib is the increasing use of *gerne* in imperative constructions, judged as \*/“wrong” not only by teachers but by many ordinary speakers including the authors, who admittedly feel reluctant adjusting to announcements like *Wir haben Sommerschlussverkauf! Kommen Sie gerne vorbei!* ‘Sales are on! Drop in happily!’ Since the primary aim of linguists is not to criticize but to record and analyze linguistic changes, we will try to summarize different usages of the adverb *gern(e)* to see how this new use of *gerne* in imperatives arises.

For the purpose of this squib we distinguish four broad uses which we discuss in turn. In its first use (G1), *gerne* acts as an adverb modifying a (typically) habitual eventuality. *Gerne* in this use is often accompanied by *always* or *not/never*, and conveys that the subject enjoys (*gerne*) or doesn’t enjoy (*nicht gerne*) the activity. *Gerne* always relates to the subject and is used with all persons, tenses and verb valencies (but see below for episodic interpretations in the past).<sup>2</sup>

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\*Nimm gerne unseren Dank entgegen, Martin, und alles Gute! We thank Jonathan Bobaljik, Katharina Hartmann, and Clemens Mayr for very helpful comments, translations, and discussion.

<sup>1</sup>*Gern* or *gerne*, which is etymologically related to *begehren* ‘desire’/‘crave’/‘strive for’, can be translated as ‘willingly’/‘gladly’/‘happily’/‘enjoyably’/‘be happy to’/‘like, enjoy’.

<sup>2</sup>In all the German examples, *gerne* functions syntactically as a simple adverbial. Since the meaning is more complex and there is usually no direct translation of *gerne* as an adverbial in English, we only provide paraphrases that best convey the meaning of the utterances.

- (1) a. Wir sind immer gerne zum Wickerl gegangen. G1  
 ‘We always enjoyed going to Wickerl.’  
 b. Wir stehen nicht gerne früh auf.  
 ‘We don’t like getting up early.’  
 c. Schade, dass du nicht gerne schwimmst!  
 ‘It’s a pity you don’t like swimming.’  
 d. Geht ihr gerne ins Theater?  
 ‘Do you (pl) like going to the theatre?’  
 e. Sie hänselte gerne ihren kleinen Bruder.  
 ‘She used to like teasing her little brother.’  
 f. Er demonstriert seinen Konkurrenten gern seine Überlegenheit.  
 ‘He enjoys showing his superiority to his competitors.’

Within passive constructions there is often, depending on context, ambiguity whether *gerne* relates to the (implicit) agent or to the (surface subject) patient argument. Examples such as (2) may be read two ways as indicated by the paraphrases.

- (2) Ich werde                    gerne    gelobt.  
 I    AUX.PASS                GERNE    praised  
 a. ‘I enjoy being praised.’  
 b. ‘People (e.g., approving journalists) often/regularly praise me.’

How far one may go in connecting *gerne* with the implicit agent instead of the surface subject is a frequent issue among native speakers, as is shown by the first page article “Language accidents” by veteran journalist Gudrun Harrer in the renowned daily paper *Der Standard*.<sup>3</sup> Describing a sign at a supermarket cashpoint *Diese Kassa ist leider nicht besetzt. Aber Sie werden gerne an der nächsten bedient*. ‘This cash point is not occupied, but you will happily be served at the next one.’, she sarcastically asks: How do they know at which cashpoint I like to be served?

Almost impossible (if one excludes unrealistic use) is the G1-use of *gerne* in imperative sentences, since feeling enjoyment cannot be commanded. We return to imperatives at the end of this squib.

- (3) a. #Spiel gerne Fußball!  
 ‘Like to play football!’  
 b. #Bring mich gern nach Hause!  
 ‘Like to bring me home!’

When the predicate containing *gerne* receives an episodic interpretation referring to a single event, the use of G1 is usually odd, unless *gerne* is understood to be contrasted with the opposite habitual preference. For instance, (4a) can be used to indicate that yesterday’s event was not enjoyable, although we usually enjoy going to Wickerl. Similarly, (4b) emphasizes a perhaps surprising state of affairs, namely that we liked getting up

<sup>3</sup><http://derstandard.at/2000042923766/Sprachunfaelle>

early yesterday.

- (4) a. Gestern sind wir nicht gerne zum Wickerl gegangen. #G1, ✓G2  
 ‘Yesterday, we didn’t enjoy going to Wickerl.’  
 b. Gestern sind wir gerne früh aufgestanden.  
 ‘Yesterday, we enjoyed getting up early.’ (e.g., strangely enough) (G1)  
 ‘Yesterday, we were happy to get up early.’ (e.g., to accommodate you) (G2)

In addition to the contrastive G1 use of *gerne*, examples such as (4) have another interpretation which we refer to as G2. The use of G2 is found in a much more restricted setting than that of G1 and is subject to the following conditions: i) There are typically two participants in a speaker-addressee situation, usually 1<sup>st</sup> person to 2<sup>nd</sup>. ii) One of the participants is helped, served or being allowed to do something. iii) There is always some, if maybe only a little, doubt concerning the possibility or appropriateness of demanding or making use of the service. iv) The addressee is not held to believe that the action or permission in question is indeed pleasurable to the speaker, the latter merely communicating that s/he is ready, willing and able to conform. In conjunction with *gerne*, these factors add up to indicate a pragmatic use in the realm of facework (see, e.g., Brown & Levinson 1987): a politeness strategy encouraging someone who is or might be afraid of being intrusive by assuring them that this is not the case and that the action causes some form of delight or pleasure. At the same time, the recipient of a courtesy is relieved from the unfavorable role of an applicant, by assuring them that the act of helping in (5a) or taking care of them as in (5b) is not a burden to the subject. One of the participants might be implicit, and speaker and/or addressee might speak on behalf of others and therefore use the 3<sup>rd</sup> person as in (5b) or (5c).

- (5) a. Wir helfen gern.  
 ‘We’ll be happy to help.’  
 b. Unsere Mitarbeiterin wird Sie gerne betreuen.  
 ‘Our employee will be happy to take care of you.’  
 c. Die Arbeiterkammer tut sicher gern was für deinen Vater.  
 ‘(I am sure) The chamber of labor is willing to help your father.’

There is also a tendency for topicalization of *gerne* as in (6).

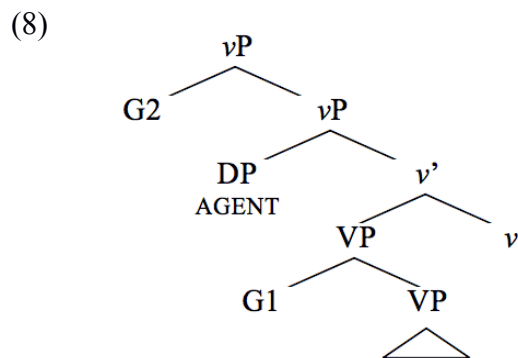
- (6) a. Gerne akzeptieren wir Ihre Kreditkarte.  
 ‘We will be happy to accept your credit card.’ [uttered by a stewardess]  
 b. Gerne machen wir Sie auf die Mailingliste “PLing [...]” aufmerksam.  
 ‘We are happy to inform you of the mailinglist “Pling”.’ [from a mailing list]

Separating G1 and G2 is also supported by the fact that the two uses can be clearly distinguished in dialogues such as (7). While Speaker A clearly disliked the event of getting up early (i.e., the ‘manner’ of getting up was joyless and G1 thus false), (s)he can still truthfully utter a *gerne* statement, as long as the idea of being the initiator of such a joyless activity creates some enjoyment (e.g., as in case of (7) for Speaker B; note, however,

that *gerne* is still speaker-oriented in that it is the speaker who is happy to initiate the event).

- (7) A: Ich bin gestern gerne früh aufgestanden. G2  
 ‘Yesterday, I was happy to get up/enjoyed getting up early.’  
 B: Wirklich? Du bist GERNE früh aufgestanden?  
 Playfully interpreting *gerne* as G1: ‘Really? You enjoyed getting up early?’  
 A: Ja – nein. Das Aufstehen hab ich gehasst, aber ich hab es gerne für dich getan.  
 ‘Yes – no. I hated the getting up, but I was happy to do it for you.’  
G1: false/G2: true

A way to distinguish between G1 and G2 in a structural approach would be to place *gerne* in different positions within an expanded verb phrase structure as in (8). G1 modifies the VP excluding the subject and hence yields a manner-like interpretation. G2 modifies the vP, i.e., the extended projection of the verb including the external argument.



The third use of *gerne* is in conjunction with modal verbs, in particular the modals *können* ‘can’ and *dürfen* ‘may’. This is a very common use of *gerne* and typically expresses that *gerne* is speaker oriented and that the speaker is happy with the possibility given by the modal statement or happy to allow the state of affairs expressed. For instance, in (9a), the speaker happily offers the possibility to cook for the addressee; in (9b), the speaker (S) expresses delight or contentment with the possibility of the addressee eating with S; and in (9c), the speaker happily grants the subject permission to visit his friend, which is only possible if the speaker has some authority over the subject.

- (9) a. Ich kann gerne für dich kochen. G3  
 ‘I would be happy to cook for you.’  
 b. Du kannst gerne bei mir essen.  
 ‘I’d be happy to have you eat with me.’  
 c. Leo kann/darf gerne zu seinem Freund gehen.  
 ‘I happily allow Leo to visit his friend.’

With enough context, the modal and *gerne* can also report someone else’s attitude. This is best in a reportative embedding structure or with subjunctive as shown in (10). In (10a),

the speaker reports that Leo happily granted the speaker permission to cook for him (Leo). In (10b), the matrix subject is understood as the speaker of the modal statement, and both *gerne* and the modal express the matrix subject's (Leo's) attitude in that Leo happily gives the addressee the permission to cook.

- (10) a. A: Hast du schon mit dem Leo gesprochen? G3  
           ‘Have you spoken with Leo already?’  
       B: Ja. Ich kann/könne gerne für ihn kochen.  
           ‘Yes. (He said that) He is happy to have me cook for him.’
- b. Leo hat gesagt, du kannst gerne für ihn kochen.  
       ‘Leo said he is happy to have you cook for him.’

Importantly, the orientation of the modal and *gerne* must match in that either both convey the speaker's perspective (as in (9)), or both convey the perspective of the subject of the reported statement (as in (10))—mixing and matching is impossible. For instance, (11) is, in principle, ambiguous with the two interpretations given (the second interpretation may be easier to access with a subjunctive modal). Such examples, however, cannot mean that the speaker offers the possibility of cooking for Leo (modal is speaker oriented) and that Leo is happy about that (*gerne* is reported context oriented); nor can it mean that Leo grants the speaker permission to cook and that the speaker is happy about that.

- (11) Ich kann gerne für Leo kochen.  
       ‘I am happy to cook for Leo.’ Speaker  
       ‘(Leo said that) He is happy to have me cook for him.’ Reported context

Note that G3 *gerne* can only occur in modal statements expressing possibility or permission. One might even reduce this duality to the expression of permission, as possibility here is dependent on the speaker's will alone. Since giving permission is less favorable to an addressee's face than ascribing a competence, *gerne* is mainly used in combination with *können*; *dürfen* is mostly found in settings that are asymmetrical (e.g. pedagogical) from the start. Universal deontic modal statements expressing orders or requests (e.g., *sollen* ‘should’ or *müssen* ‘must’) are incompatible with *gerne*. As shown in (12), there is, however, an analogue of *gerne* in universal modal statements—the adverbial *bitte* ‘please’, which tones down the order to a polite request and/or intensifies the speaker's desire that the state of affairs expressed by the modal sentence is indeed instantiated.<sup>4</sup>

- (12) a. Er soll bitte/\*gerne für mich kochen.  
           ‘He should, please, cook for me.’
- b. Er muss das bitte/\*gerne bis morgen abgeben.  
       ‘He has to, please, hand this in by tomorrow.’

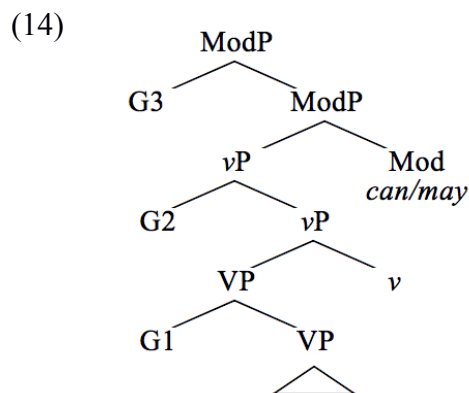
The difference between *bitte* and *gerne* shows up very clearly in modal statements with

<sup>4</sup>Statements such as *Er muss gerne kochen* ‘He must enjoy cooking’ are possible and ambiguous between an epistemic (evidence suggests that he enjoys cooking) and a deontic interpretation (he is required to enjoy cooking, e.g., as a precondition for becoming a successful cook). However, *gerne* in such cases then only involves interpretations G1 or G2 and cannot modify the modal.

the existential modals können/dürfen ‘can’/‘may’ and negation. Negation as in (13a) can be interpreted above (13ai) or below (13a ii) the modal (with different intonations)—the former yields a negated possibility interpretation (equivalent to a universal interpretation), the latter a possibility to not do something (see Wurmbrand 2001, among many others). Adding *bitte* and *gerne* disambiguates the sentence. As shown in (13b), the sentence with *bitte* can only have the negated possibility interpretation—i.e., an emphasized request or order that Leo should not come. If, on the other hand, *gerne* is added, the sentence only has the interpretation that the speaker happily offers or allows Leo to not come.

- (13) a. Leo darf nicht kommen.  
 ‘Leo can/may not come.’  
 i. Leo is not allowed to come.  $\neg \diamond$   
 ii. Leo is allowed to not come.  $\diamond \neg$
- b. Leo darf aber bitte nicht kommen.  $\neg \diamond$   
 ‘Leo is not allowed to come.’ (Speaker emphasizes request.)
- c. Leo darf gerne nicht kommen.  $\diamond \neg$   
 ‘Leo is allowed to not come.’ (Speaker is happy to grant permission.)

In syntactic terms, we would say that *gerne* in its G3 use attaches to the TP or modal projection as in (14) (we ignore verb second in the tree) and thus takes very high scope.



Under a pragmatic approach, *gerne* here would be treated as a pragmatic entity whose scope typically is not limited to the lexical item or syntactic phrase it is attached to, but rather extends to and modifies the whole utterance (see, e.g., Dressler & Barbaresi 2017). Structural evidence for the high position of G3 is provided by examples such as (15). In (15a), a G3 interpretation is possible (the speaker is happy to offer the possibility). However, this interpretation disappears in (15b) where *gerne* is forced into a low position in the second conjunct (i.e., G2 or G1), which yields, if at all, only a subject-oriented interpretation and is not compatible with a speaker-oriented interpretation where *gerne* modifies the modal.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>As pointed out by K. Hartmann, (15b) may become possible if, facilitated by adding *auch* ‘too’ in the second conjunct, an ellipsis strategy involving the modal can be used.



- (15) a. Du kannst gerne bei mir essen und schlafen. G3  
 ‘You can happily eat and sleep at my place.’  
 b. \*Du kannst bei mir essen und gerne schlafen. \*G3  
 ‘You can eat at my place and happily sleep there.’

The pragmatic switch of *gerne* from adverb to pragmatic particle, which we call G4, is most evident in cases such as in (16) where *gerne* stands by itself, or is a part of phrases or incomplete sentences. In examples like these, which occur very frequently, the *gerne* statement cannot (or not easily) be analyzed as an elliptic use of an adverb but requires recourse to pragmatic factors.<sup>6</sup>

- (16) a. Danke für deine Hilfe! - Gern! G4  
 ‘Thank you for your help! – It was a pleasure!’  
 b. Gerne auch mit Hund!  
 ‘We happily accept dogs!’  
 c. Kellner, bringen Sie endlich mein Bier! - Aber gern!  
 ‘Waiter! Bring me my beer (at last)! – With pleasure!’

This brings us back to our outset, the use of *gerne* in imperative constructions. As we have seen in (3), since imperatives typically involve orders and requests, *gerne* is not felicitous in an imperative. Instead *bitte* is used.

- (17) Schauen Sie bitte/\*gerne nicht weg!

Imperatives with *gerne* do occur in corpora, however, and increasingly so. This may arguably have been encouraged by the frequent G3 and G4 uses of *gerne*. We won’t elaborate here on the often blurred and theory-dependent boundaries between the notions of adverb and particle, but rather turn to the pragmatic implications. An utterance such as (18a) is understood as a possibly encouraging offer or invitation for the addressee to look around. The speaker does not make a genuine request and may be indifferent regarding whether the addressee does indeed look around or not. Although such utterances represent possibilities and not requests, there is a certain anticipation of the addressee’s interest in the suggested action without forcing it on them. The difference between an encouraging invitation and a speaker-induced request is brought out clearly when *gerne* is switched to *bitte* as in (18b), which cannot be understood without the speaker’s desire that the addressee indeed carry out the action.<sup>7</sup>

- (18) a. Schauen Sie sich gerne noch ein bisschen um!  
 ‘Feel free to look around a bit more!’

<sup>6</sup>(16b) is from the almost eponymous website <http://www.gernemithund.de/>. Note that in (16c) the utterer of *gerne* is supporting his own face rather than the addressee’s by somewhat ironically reframing the impolite commando-like order as a less intrusive plea.

<sup>7</sup>The *gerne/bitte* difference in (18) is reminiscent of the interpretational differences in modal contexts such as (13). This connection could be expressed in accounts to imperatives (such as Kaufmann 2012), which analyze imperatives in terms of modalized propositions. It may then be possible to reduce *gerne* in imperatives to the use in G3.

- b. Schauen Sie sich bitte noch ein bisschen um!  
‘Please look around a bit more!’

Asking someone to do what they might have wanted to do anyway and thus communicating the shared ambition and pleasure of both participants seems to be a Columbus’ egg of politeness. On the other side, the G4 use of *gerne* triggers a strong clash with the absurdity of the traditional non-pragmatical literal reading.

Let’s go back to G1 imperatives as in (3). When they are used to soften an act of prohibiting something, they seem less improbable:

- (19) a. Spiel gerne Fußball – aber belästige mich nicht damit!  
‘Go ahead and play football – but don’t bother me with it!’  
b. Bring mich gern nach Hause – aber noch zu mir kommen kannst du nicht!  
‘You can bring me home – but don’t expect me to let you in!’

Here are some more examples taken from actual speech utterances or texts, so the (native) reader can test their proneness to neologisms.

- (20) a. Falls Sie weitere Fragen haben, melden Sie sich gerne!  
‘If you have further questions, feel free to/#happily contact me!’  
[from an e-mail by a German teacher in high school]  
b. Bringen Sie gerne Ihren vierbeinigen Liebling mit!  
‘Feel free to/#happily bring along your four-legged sweetheart!’  
[from an ad for a holiday home]  
c. Begleiten Sie mich gern auf meinem Ausflug in die Naturheilkunde!  
‘Feel free to join me/#Happily join me on my journey to naturopathy!’  
[self-characterization of an alternative healer]  
d. Wenn Sie etwas benötigen, wenden Sie sich gerne an uns!  
‘If you need something, feel free to/#happily let us know!’  
[uttered by an Austrian Airlines stewardess]

Incidentally, the stewardess closed her address to the passengers with *Fühlen Sie sich bereits wohl bei uns!* ‘Feel already comfortable with us!’. But that’s another story for another time.

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