

How to ask? Politeness strategies in historical letters

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Abstracts (in alphabetical order)

How to Ask in Ancient Greek:

a (socio)pragmatic analysis of letters from the Postclassical period.

Giuseppina di Bartolo (University of Cologne)

Make a request belongs to the most basic activity in human interaction. By means of acts of request, speakers get their recipients to perform an action that is for the benefit of themselves or a third party (cf. Searle 1979). Moreover, acts of request are generally considered “intrinsically impolite” and, therefore, speakers tend to adopt different politeness strategies in order to minimize the threat that is intrinsically present within these acts (cf., among others, Taleghani-Nikazm 2011).

Various factors influence how to make a request and where to insert it. Most of them are culturally sensitive elements which vary across languages. However, two elements almost always play a significant role in shaping the construction of the request: the relationship of speaker and addressee and the context in which the utterance is performed (i.e., communication setting, discourse structure and topic). Historical linguists do not have the possibility to investigate acts of requests by means of conversational data, however they can rely on letters. From antiquity throughout the whole modern era, they were the most common medium used for communication among individuals, both on private and official level.

The present paper analyzes acts of request in Ancient Greek, which is one of the few languages in the world with a more than three thousand years uninterrupted written tradition. This language shows different ways of expressing acts of requests (cf. Dickey 1996 and 2016; Denizot 2011). Request verbs followed by a structure which expresses the content of the request, and imperatives are the most recurring strategies. Both strategies will be considered within the present investigation.

The corpus under scrutiny includes letters from the Postclassical period, considering in particular three case studies: (i) letters and petitions from documentary papyri of the Roman and Byzantine periods (1st – 8th cent. CE), (ii) letters from the corpus of councils acts (9th cent. CE), and (iii) letters found as an integrated part of the *Chronicle* of John Malalas (i.e., letters that are quoted / reproduced by the author within his work).

The investigation addresses the workshop's research questions, contextualizing the data within more general linguistic research. It combines a pragmatic and a sociopragmatic approach (Culperer 2021), analyzing the data through the lens of the politeness theory (cf., among others, Brown and Levinson 1987). One of its main contributions consists of making data from Ancient Greek available for cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparisons.

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Never Ask, Never Apologise: Politeness strategies in Italian merchant letters between London, Milan, Florence, 1392-1410

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Merchant letters are immediately concerned with issues of practicality, written with the intention to ensure that business unfolds in an efficient manner. Various types of requests expressed in merchant letters must be handled delicately in order for the request to be entertained by the addressee. Traders use specific argots, terms, and sectorial languages to express their needs in a form of in-group identity formation (Wagner, Beinhoff & Outhwaite 2017). In this sense, linguistic strategies of politeness play a fundamental role in increasing the probability that a particular request will be satisfied. Negotiation in the Mediterranean between two or more people centred on, and was only made possible by, the work of several linguistic and cultural mediators (Lazzarini 2015). Using material from the voluminous Datini Archive, Prato, Tuscany, this paper details two case-studies where politeness strategies come to the fore in Italian merchant letters.

The first concerns the successful negotiation of trade practices between Italian merchants working in London and the export of goods and services back to the “merchant of Prato”, Francesco di Marco Datini during the late fourteenth century. I focus on the strategies of request made from Italy (for prices, shipping information etc.) and how these requests are then culturally mediated between Italian merchants “on the ground” based in England, and local English merchants from London, and who were forced to interpret such requests (Brown 2017; Bowles & Brown 2022). Using the recently published material from Nicolini (2020), I consider how different cultural identities express politeness in different ways and through different pragmatic levels of linguistic categories.

The second case-study looks at a long-standing collaboration between local merchants from Milan and the Datini merchants back in Tuscany. While these Milanese merchants were not employed directly in the Datini company, they were obliged under contract to supply the company with local products (including wine, arms and armour, sheep skins etc.) from locations in and around Milan (Frangioni 1994). I detail the business relationship from the initial drafting of the contract until the closure of the accounts with Milan, when difficult matters of negotiation had to be resolved as the Milanese merchants became insolvent. This negotiation was settled over a series of several months, involving many back and forth requests, replies, clarifications, and protracted excuses.

Using the material currently housed in the voluminous Datini Archive in Prato, Tuscany (c.150,000 items of correspondence), the paper aims to assess which politeness strategies were employed across a large trading network in Renaissance Italy that stretched from London to Syria. Specifically, it aims to address the following questions: What were the politeness strategies adopted by these merchants in their letters, and were these strategies successful? How could writers make the requests they needed to make and still ensure a happy business relationship? What can a study of politeness and rhetorical strategies tell us about communication in early modern Europe more

generally? Adopting the tools from historical sociolinguistics, this paper will provide an insight into Italian speech communities in these different cities around the Mediterranean basin and beyond.

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From "I praise God for your sake" to "May God extend your life": the polemical worlds behind a transition in epistolary politeness conventions in 7th to 10th century Arabic letters

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Geoffrey Khan has outlined the radical shift in epistolary formulae on documentary letters largely on papyri which occurred between the 8th and 9th centuries, following the shift in regime from a Syrian-based Umayyads, to the 'Abbasids whose core of support was drawn from Khurasan in Eastern Iran.

In early Arabic letters until the late 8th century, a central component of the structural formulae with which letters began was the blessing, 'I praise God for your sake.' From the ninth century, this formula was replaced with the blessing, 'May God extend your life.' I have been using digital tools to systematically mine information from a large corpora of hundreds of digitized Arabic works to compare Khan's findings from documents, with the record of letters purporting to date to this period which have been preserved (or fabricated) in literary sources such as historical chronicles. I seek to understand whether the literary texts match the documentary texts, and to understand more about the historical, literary and religious discourses within which these conventional phrases were embedded.

I will show that that, far from being neutral, passive conventions, blessing formulae were embedded in polemics about politeness, religious orthodoxy and ideas about social status. Through the critique or justification of such formulae, writers made arguments about the extent to which courtly and bureaucratic protocols were considered to be appropriate models for other spheres of society.

“I returned his civilities with the same politeness”
Politeness in epistolary novels of the long eighteenth century¹

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Politeness is an elusive concept that permeates all aspects of modern life and society in spite of the persistent complaints that politeness levels have never been quite as bad as today. But how can we trace the history of politeness? To what extent has polite behaviour changed over the centuries and how has the discourse on politeness changed, i.e. the way people talk about politeness? Is politeness mainly concerned with the underlying morality of behaviour? Or is it concerned with a polished veneer that disguises people’s darker motives and intentions? In this presentation, I will give a brief outline of how historical politeness research tackles such questions, and I will do this in the context of an exploratory case study of politeness in eighteenth-century epistolary novels.

The eighteenth century stands out as a particularly interesting century in the history of politeness in English. It was the time of increased codification of English (grammars and dictionaries), conduct literature and educational theatre. And it was in this century, that politeness turned from the morality of good behaviour to a veneer of social etiquette (as argued in Jucker 2020). It was also the century of the epistolary novel with its focus on reflections and emotions. Fictional letters written by the I-narrator or by other characters of the novel regularly discuss issues of proper behaviour and class distinctions. As data, I use a new data source, the *Corpus of Long Eighteenth-Century Epistolary Novels* (EPICOL18, Vogt 2022). This four-million-word corpus consists of 28 novels originally published between 1680 and 1820.

On the basis of a systematic 60,000-word sampler corpus consisting of roughly 2,000 words drawn from each of the 28 novels, all manifestations of requests are manually extracted (based on a methodology proposed by Kohnen 2008). Selected manifestations are then retrieved from the entire corpus in order to trace their development across the early, middle and late period of EPICOL18. The ultimate aim of the investigation is to find further support for the earlier findings of a dissociation of a superficial surface politeness from the underlying morality in the second half of the eighteenth century (Jucker 2020).

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Politeness and Rudeness in the Letters of Photius

¹ Title quote from Georgiana Cavendish, 1778, *The Sylph*.

Daniil Pleshak (Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen)

The letter collection of the Byzantine patriarch Photius contains letters from two periods of his life. Some of them come from Photius' first patriarchate (859-867), while the rest were written after his deposition and date from the times of his trials, exile, and return to Constantinople as a teacher for the children of emperor Basil I.

The letters show that the personality of Photius has a greater impact on his attitude towards the recipient than his status or the nature of the request. Even when speaking from exile, he is confrontational towards his addressees and is ready to use threats and humiliation to achieve what he wants. Nevertheless, Photius often drapes his unsavory attitude in high rhetoric and allusions to classical texts, thus making letters more valuable for the readers as a piece of literature and elevating himself above the recipient. However, there are few letters addressed to the highest members of society where Photius humbles himself and follows the rules of politeness.

The paper aims to show Photius and his epistolography legacy, his addressees, and the ways he interacts with them. It will also show the influence of the Graeco-Roman epistolography tradition on Photius' writing.

Gijsbert Rutten & Marijke van der Wal

(Leiden University)

Various characteristics of historical letters, such as formulaic language and forms of address, have been analyzed from a politeness perspective (e.g. Bijkerk 2004, Tiisala 2004), sometimes also explicitly from a socio-pragmatic perspective (Nevala 2004). In Rutten & van der Wal (2014), we analyzed Dutch private letters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, arguing that the many changes occurring in the system of forms of address, which includes both nominal and pronominal forms, can be modeled sociolinguistically and without reference to politeness. Nonetheless, we also observed differences between the private letters in our corpus and a limited number of business letters that we had at our disposal at the time, which did suggest some influence of politeness strategies. It is this issue that we want to explore in our presentation. We have recently compiled a small corpus of business letters of seventeenth-century merchants (van der Wal & Rutten subm.). For some of them, we also have private letters. In the presentation, we will first analyze the distribution of forms of address in the business letters against the background of what we know about private letters in general. We will then make a more qualitative comparison of the business letters with private letters by the same writers.

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Wanting or asking? Formulations of request in Arabic papyrus letters

Petra Sijpesteijn (Leiden University)

After the Arabs arrived in Egypt in the mid-seventh century, Arabic was added to the diverse linguistic landscape present in Egypt. Besides Coptic and Greek, the languages already in use, Arabic was now also used to produce papyrus documents. The Arabs introduced their own scribal, administrative, legal and documentary customs, combining Byzantine, Persian and Arabian traditions, but they also made use of practices that were already in use in Egypt. While Arabic was used right from the moment that the Arabs took over control of Egypt, the use of Arabic writings increased dramatically from the ninth century. The use of Greek had by that time already become greatly reduced, nevertheless continuing into the ninth century in the administration and presumably beyond it. Coptic continued for several centuries to be used for letters and documents of everyday use, and for liturgical use still much longer, even after Arabic had become the language of choice for Christian Egyptians.

Arabic papyrus letters of request show different ways of formulating the question posed to the addressee. Amongst the attested expressions there are those that use a verb with the meaning 'to want' (*arāda; ḥabba*) used in the first person ('I/we want'). Using examples from the seventh to tenth centuries, I will examine in this paper how these expressions operate in the letters, what other verbs or expressions are used with it and what alternative wordings were available.

Miriam Wagner (Cambridge University)

"Polite" Popolo and "Appropriate" Magnates? Fourteenth-Century Sieneese Petitions for Amnesty and the Good Manners of the Italian Communes

Lidia L. Zanetti Domingues (Free University, Amsterdam)

Sociolinguistic studies claim a negative correlation between the level of politeness of a request and the social status of the requester. In historiography, though, politeness is construed as a set of norms fashioned by elites to set themselves apart from the commoners and assert their values as prescriptive. The late Middle Ages has generally been identified as a turning point of this process, with the Italian city-states at the forefront. However, communal society was characterized by the coexistence of two elites, each representing a different ethos and values: alongside a politically pre-eminent *Popolo* (a sworn group constituted mostly by merchants and artisans), Italian cities hosted a rich and culturally influential urban aristocracy. Which of them managed to have its own values prevail in "petitionary etiquette"? And did their own members practice what they preached, or did they display the "rudeness" that sociolinguistics posits as typical of powerful groups? This paper will use early 14th-century petitions for amnesty from Siena to try and answer these questions. It argues that, for the "multi-elite" society of late medieval Italy, appropriateness might be a more helpful concept than politeness when analyzing petitioning styles. Showing awareness of the behavioral expectations associated with one's social identity, including by behaving rudely if that was considered the norm for

members of one's group, could be therefore seen as a better petitioning strategy than abiding by linguistic conventions seen as universal.