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INTRODUCTION

How to ask (im)politely

Letters from Europe, the Mediterranean and the Middle East from the ninth to the nineteenth century

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1. Introduction

This collection of papers continues the discussion set out in the Journal of Historical Pragmatics a few years ago with a special issue on politeness in and across historical Europe (Paternoster et al. [eds] 2023). In their introductory paper, the editors of that issue noted that research on historical politeness and impoliteness has increased significantly over the years and has included a variety of languages, referring to volumes such as Culpeper and Kádár ([eds] 2010) and Bax and Kádár ([eds] 2011), whilst also indicating that "to date, no major research project has been dedicated to politeness in historical Europe" (Kádár et al. 2023: 1).

In this volume, we aim to contribute more building blocks to just such a major research project. By including studies of historical politeness in Arabic, we also push the boundaries of the idea of Europe, already problematised in the previous special issue (Kádár et al. 2023: 2), and align with still another special issue of the Journal of Historical Pragmatics, which dealt with politeness in ancient languages, though not in Arabic (Ridealgh [ed.] 2019). We believe that many more building blocks are needed from a variety of language areas and historical periods before we can even begin to think of an overarching perspective on historical politeness in Europe and beyond. Whilst Jucker (2020) offers an overview of politeness in the history of English, such an overview is not within reach for many languages — not even for relatively well-researched languages such as Dutch. In fact, Jucker (2020: 3) argues that a "truly comprehensive history of politeness in English does not yet appear to be possible" and indicates that his study offers "no more than a first step in this direction".

As politeness and impoliteness are still very broad topics, we focus here on politeness in relation to requests, thereby drawing on a specific type of data:

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historical letters. Comparative analyses of one demarcated topic have been common in historical pragmatics, at least since Jucker and Taavitsainen's ([eds] 2003) seminal volume on address systems, and T/V dynamics in particular, across a variety of European languages. Our focus on requests is motivated by the fact that, for much of the pre-modern and early-modern period in societies around the world, letter-writing was a highly important — if not the most important — medium for requests, for registering a complaint and for attempting to put the wheels of redress and remediation into motion. Questions that concern us are:

- How do people formulate a request for help in a letter?
- What linguistic strategies do they apply?
- How do they balance the need to be effective with the urgency of the problem at hand?
- Which (im)politeness strategies do letter writers employ in order to reach a certain goal? And,
- How, methodologically, can these writings be most usefully deployed to illuminate the societies that produced them?

By focussing on the genre of letters, both private and business, and on politeness strategies in historical letters, we follow the research tradition exemplified in an early special issue of the Journal of Historical Pragmatics (Nevalainen and Tanskanen [eds] 2004). More generally, letters have emerged as an essential data-type in historical sociolinguistics and historical pragmatics, along with other types of so-called ego-documents (Elspaß 2012; van der Wal and Rutten [eds] 2013).

The papers in this collection are presented in chronological order. The issue begins with two papers on medieval Arabic. Fokelien Kootstra-Ford (2026) analyses eight letters by members of the same household in ninth-century Egypt. The letters are addressed to the same person, Abū Hurayra, who is asked for financial help and to act as an intermediary between the senders (who are not necessarily the writers of the letters) and a third person, possibly their father. Whereas the usual way to formulate a request in these letters is by using a direct imperative, Kootstra-Ford argues that the imperative is mitigated through the formulaic structure of the letters, which functions as a conventionalised polite frame.

In the second paper on Arabic, Petra Sijpesteijn (2026) continues the discussion of seemingly impolite forms that express politeness, zooming in on the form *I want* as the introduction of a request in early-medieval correspondence. Tracing uses of the expression in papyrus letters from Egypt from the seventh to the ninth century, she observes that *I want* developed from a genuine desire used only to formulate requests impolitely to a conventionalised polite expression to introduce regular and even delicate questions (albeit always within relationships where such requests could be expected).

The third paper, by Josh Brown (2026), discusses Italian letters written by merchants from the fourteenth century, and sent from London and Milan to the famous Datini company in Prato (Tuscany). It seems significant that even in situations of delayed financial payment or lack of communication, the language in the letters remains similar, also in terms of politeness strategies, which Brown explains is a means of maintaining the important trade relationship. Another observation concerns linguistic directness and social proximity. Brown argues that more direct requests can be found in the letters from Milan to Prato, possibly because the social ties between Milan and Prato were stronger than those between London and Prato.

The next paper is by Gijsbert Rutten and Marijke van der Wal (2026), who focus on the use of forms of address in seventeenth-century Dutch letters written by merchants, comparing business letters to private letters. They find a communal change in the use of nominal forms of address, which suggests a difference in social meaning between the variants analysed. It is, however, difficult to reproduce the communal pattern at the level of individual authors, even in cases of multiple private and business letters by one and the same merchant. Rutten and van der Wal conclude that the social meaning attached to the variants used was in great flux and partially only emerging at the time.

The final paper in the collection is authored by Andreas Jucker (2026), who shifts attention to epistolary novels from eighteenth-century England. Whilst the representation of politeness in literary and metalinguistic materials (e.g., etiquette manuals [Paternoster (2022)]) is an exciting topic for any period, the emergence of politeness as an ideology with significant social implications renders eighteenth-century England particularly interesting for such an analysis. In Jucker's data, requests do not usually take the modern form of non-imposition politeness by asking about the ability or willingness of the addressee to perform the action. Instead, writers use so-called supplication politeness, which means they use verbs like *beg* and *beseech*, though they may also adopt the formulaic request marker *pray*, grammaticalised from *I pray you*, and which confirms the attitude of supplication.

2. Approaching requests in historical letters

How do we ask someone to do something for us? A request is a speech act "in which the requester asks the requestee to do something which is the [sic] in the interest of the requester" (House and Kádár 2021: 108). Requests are, therefore, orientated to a future event (see House and Kádár [2021: 107]): the requester wants to obtain information or get goods or money from the requestee. These are

relevant examples from the types of historical discourse analysed in this special issue, namely letters. Historical letters were not only information carriers that senders used to report about their vicissitudes to distant loved ones. Throughout history, letters have also been used for business purposes — for example, by merchants who were active across Europe, such as the famous example of Francesco Datini, who, based in Tuscany, had trade contacts from Ireland to Syria (see Brown [2026]). Furthermore, loved ones had often travelled far away for business reasons, so that letters comprised a combination of private and commercial information when family members had become business partners (e.g., Rutten and van der Wal [2026]).

Requests impose on the addressee, which means that letter writers will have to find ways to get the addressee to do something for them: they need to adhere to some kind of politeness. We follow here the conveniently broad definition of House and Kádár (2021: 57): "Politeness is a pragmatic phenomenon by means of which language users express that they take others' feelings into account and follow the social norms holding for a context". This definition, with its references to relatively broad matters such as "feelings", "social norms" and "context", serves our exploratory (rather than comprehensive) purposes (see Kádár et al. [2023: 3]).

What counts as polite, or impolite for that matter, is certainly a matter of social norms and context, but needs to be reconstructed through an emic approach to first-order politeness (Jucker 2020: 8): that is to say, we are interested here not in universal, language-independent, theory-driven conceptualisations of politeness, but in concrete, language-specific phenomena used in actual letters of requests. This means that the papers in this issue are strongly data-orientated. In some cases (e.g., Brown and Kootstra-Ford), a bottom-up approach is taken to see what kind of linguistic forms actually occur in the context of specific requests. Even when one particular expression is traced through time in one corpus (Sijpesteijn) the interpretation depends largely on an analysis of each letter. The data analysis veers heavily towards the qualitative in these cases. In other cases, particularly in the papers on English (Jucker) and Dutch (Rutten and van der Wal), previous research has led to more specific ideas about the concrete politeness strategies used in historical stages of the language, and in historical letters in particular. These authors thus take a quantitative, corpus-based approach first, grounded in hypotheses from the literature, and then they move on to qualitative analyses for more detailed interpretations of the patterns found.

Theoretically, the papers in this issue are thus clearly embedded in what is called second- and third-wave politeness studies (Jucker 2020; House and Kádár 2021: 60–61), in which researchers primarily look for discursively and interactionally produced forms of politeness before embarking on all-too-strong generalisa-

tions. Historical correspondence offers an interesting perspective in this regard, as it may consist of exchanges of letters over time, which includes both the sender's and the addressee's perspective. If only one side of the communication survives, a range of letters by one sender to the same addressee may still offer indirect information on the perception of the sender by the addressee (as is the case in Brown's and Koostra-Ford's papers). Scrutinising historical data, in a bottom-up fashion, and in an effort to identify potential markers of politeness (for example, of mitigating strategies that are meant to reduce the impact of a request on the addressee), the authors in this issue have a clear eye on discernment politeness and conventionalised, politic language use (e.g., Ridealgh and Jucker [2019] and Watts [2003]). Several authors (Kootstra-Ford, Sijpesteijn, Brown, Rutten and van der Wal) explicitly refer to the conventional forms of language that appear to display politic behaviour (i.e., verbal behaviour that is conventionally expected but does not overtly index politeness or impoliteness).

This focus on discernment politeness and conventional forms also means that many authors in this special issue analyse formulaic language. Formulaic language is a phenomenon that is prominent in all kinds of letters, across languages and historical periods (e.g., Serra [2023] and van der Wal and Rutten [2024]). In this issue, formulaic language, as the frame for carrying conventionalised polite forms, is discussed in the papers by Kootstra-Ford, Sijpesteijn and Brown. Jucker, who does not discuss discernment politeness, talks about forms such as *pray* and *please* as courtesy request markers, which can be seen as the result of the conventionalisation (and grammaticalisation) of a polite form such as *I pray you* into a succinct formula. In Jucker's paper, such forms are connected with supplication politeness which is also encountered in Arabic papyrus letters (Sijpesteijn, see also Sijpesteijn [2024]), but which does not seem to have been considered appropriate in other contexts in Arabic (Kootstra-Ford) and does not have a counterpart in the Italian (Brown) sources analysed here.

The example of supplication politeness therefore clearly demonstrates that politeness phenomena are social phenomena bound to specific contexts, places and times (Terkourafi 2001). As such, they are also susceptible to change. Change in the use of politeness, whether it is a general change in the type of politeness (Jucker) or a specific change in the choice of polite, or rather politic forms (Rutten and van der Wal), should make us cautious of pan-historic interpretations of European politeness.

3. Drawing some common threads and looking ahead

Whilst studying letter-writing as a genre at different places and times may alert us to the situated nature of the forms used and what they meant to the people who used them (cautioning against generalisations regarding their import based on formal grounds), the letters analysed in the articles contained in this issue do have in common the fact that they all served transactional purposes and, for that reason, contain requests of different kinds. This commonality enables some novel insights, both theoretical and methodological, that might otherwise pass unnoticed were these letters to be regarded as part of a single corpus jointly with other letters of a more personal kind.

On the theoretical side, a new dimension highlighted collectively by these letters is that of politeness for the sake of getting the job done — politeness as "transactional", rather than maintaining or safeguarding one's relationship with an addressee. We usually think of politeness as taking care of the interactional or relational dimension of things, but here we see clearly how it can (also) affect their transactional dimension, with specific phrasings taking on an argumentative role that aims to exert pressure in order to achieve a desired outcome.

In many of these letters, the formula chosen highlights the rights and obligations of the two parties, placing them as reasons to grant the request, rather than trying to cater to the individual wants of each party and offering reassurance that those are not in any way threatened. This emphasis on the inter-dependence of the two parties rather than their separate desires turns politeness into an argumentative instrument at the service of the transactional goal. An example of this is seen in the expression "alone in the world", which accompanies many of the requests in several of the Egyptian letters analysed by Sijpestein (2024), some of which are also present in the dataset analysed by Kootstra-Ford. As Sijpestein (2024: 133–134) notes, "The people who wrote these letters are not literally alone [… r]ather, it is the act of having been cast aside — and therefore deprived of the backing that they expected on the basis of their relationship with the addressee or someone else — that forms their most important argument in their search for help. In other words, the severance of the connection that they relied upon for support is their main justification for being entitled to assistance". By positioning the speaker below the addressee and acknowledging the power of the latter over the former, this expression creates a moral obligation to comply with the speaker's request, actually intensifying its strength. The addressee is under an obligation to act not for the sake of the speaker but because of social imperatives that it is in their interest to be seen to uphold. This construal also highlights different facets of power, reminding us that next to power as autonomy, power can emanate from inter-dependence — a situation one might find in more collectivist societies, of

which medieval Egypt may well have been one (Rustow 2014). Acknowledging the different roles and *raisons d'etre* for politeness in historical societies thus theoretically enriches our understanding of the relevant phenomena, adding extra dimensions to what their synchronic study affords.

On the methodological side, a returning concern in (im)politeness studies is how we move beyond searching for specific lexical items as a way of locating (im)politeness in order to identify the full range of linguistic means giving rise to it. This problem is compounded for historical research, where having corpus data available is actually the best-case scenario, the possibility of observing a recipient's reaction being no longer available. The difficulties that are part and parcel of doing historical research turn out to be blessings in disguise here. Owing to the limited and partial availability of materials, researchers dealing with these texts have developed a multiplicity of ways of extracting information from them that those dealing with more recent materials could adopt and benefit from. Further to anthropology-inspired thick description, these include taking into account aspects of the materiality of the texts, multi-layered corpus tagging, and drawing on the marginalia of the texts — all definite reminders that multi-modality is not the sole prerogative of our time but can be interpreted in many ways.

Even developing these new ways of extracting information from the texts available, however, does not offer an easy solution in the case of conduct politeness, which concerns morality (how to be a good person, "what to do" in order to be perceived as one), as opposed to etiquette politeness, which concerns "how to do" things (e.g., how to behave at the table) and is compatible with "darker" intentions. Identifying conduct politeness cannot be done through meta-talk about politeness nor through semi-conventionalised request forms, because both of those, focusing on form, will be the same for conduct and for etiquette politeness. Identifying conduct politeness thus remains something of a riddle when it comes to locating it empirically in text. This methodological difficulty, however, could trigger us to reconsider the need for this distinction: to what extent are conduct politeness and etiquette politeness really distinct phenomena in the consciousness of the users, if they cannot be confidently identified in the text?

Both theoretically and methodologically, then, the studies presented in this special issue offer new vantage points and help to advance the field of (im)politeness studies more generally, sometimes answering questions and at other times raising new ones. First and foremost, they represent solid empirical case studies of requestive phenomena in the context of medieval and early-modern Europe and the Mediterranean, enriching our stock of knowledge in this regard. They may be "no more than a first step in this direction" but they are an important one to take nonetheless.

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