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Ancient Egyptian politeness throughout the Ages: Approaches, Questions, and Results

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“Since many modern practices of politeness have roots in history, it is perhaps not too ambitious to argue that no theory of politeness can be complete without engaging in some form of historical research.” House and Kádár (2021, p. 63)

1. Aim and scope

This book represents a pioneering effort in the field of (im)politeness research, focusing on ancient Egyptian texts spanning all historical periods. The study of politeness continues to captivate scholars interested in language and society. Our primary aim is to create an accessible and valuable resource for researchers in ancient Egyptian history and pragmatists working on cross-cultural communication. Despite its profound potential to unveil and dissect social dynamics in communication, the methods of politeness research remain largely unfamiliar to philologists studying ancient texts. Furthermore, existing general overviews and textbooks on politeness lack examples or discussions from antiquity (e.g., Bargiela-Chiappini & Kádár, 2011; House & Kádár, 2021). Although a recent edited volume explored politeness in the Classical world (Unceta Gómez & Berger, 2022), comprehensive diachronic studies on non-alphabetical and non-Western ancient textual traditions are still conspicuously absent. Thus, this book aspires to introduce frameworks applicable to ancient data through case studies embracing all linguistic stages and scripts in Egypt, while also providing comparative insights for the broader field of sociopragmatics that can help us understand why humans interact the way they do. The field’s applications and benefits for understanding textual corpora expand beyond dialogic sources, as discussed in Kádár and House ([this volume](#)). We hope that the approaches presented here will provide a suitable framework for identifying the agency, function, and communicative scope of ancient monologic texts (such as poems, hymns, or other texts loosely classified as “religious” and “ritual” in the secondary literature) in their own terms, and divorced from Eurocentric, etic genre-approaches.

Ancient Egyptian, an Afroasiatic dead language, spans approximately 4,000 years of textual history (circa 2,600 BCE - 1,700 CE). It encompasses five linguistic phases: Old Egyptian, Middle Egyptian, Late Egyptian, Demotic, and Coptic, each employing four distinct scripts: hieroglyphs, hieratic, demotic, and Coptic (Loprieno, 2008; Allen, 2014; Grossman et al., 2015). With such an extensive history of continuous usage, ancient Egyptian offers a unique backdrop for examining how language and behavioral norms evolve amidst varying sociopolitical scenarios in a civilization's development. Furthermore, the rich and diverse textual production of ancient Egypt provides our contributors with a wide array of sources to investigate politeness, including personal missives, letters to deceased relatives, speech captions in elite tombs, literary narratives, religious texts, and more.

Politeness theory gained prominence following the publication of Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson's seminal work, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, in 1987. Brown and Levinson's model notably popularized the concept of facework, which delves into how language is strategically employed by speakers (or, in the ancient world, writers) to mitigate the imposition of a request or to veil the offense of an accusation. Speakers can select from various formulas of positive (indicative of friendliness) or negative (indicative of deference) politeness, contingent on factors such as social hierarchy, power differentials, or the gravity of the message within a specific culture. Conversely, the concept of discernment politeness emerged as a reaction to facework. Discernment politeness does not scrutinize the degree of politeness as a deliberate choice made by the speaker but rather as a set of socially imposed rules to be adhered to in particular interactions, discerned from the context.

Initially a field characterized by highly polarized theories, (im)politeness has evolved into an independent discipline where scholars engage in productive conversations, thus gaining increasing popularity in pragmatics. Various frameworks and contributions from linguistic and social theory have enriched politeness, offering scholars new analytical tools. Despite its potential, politeness research has received insufficient attention in Egyptology and Coptic studies. Apart from a few pioneering studies on the Late Ramesside Letters during the first two decades of the 2,000s (see section 2 below), research on this topic has been scarce. This is noteworthy given that the study of hierarchy and inequality in ancient Egypt remains a contentious issue, continuously yielding significant scholarship that challenges our preconceived notions about social stratification and authority (e.g., Moreno García, 2014; Hue-Arcé, 2017; Lehner, 2023). Through a critical examination of politeness in ancient Egyptian texts, we can derive insights from the sources regarding the existence of taboos, methods for displaying prestige, appropriate conduct, and guidelines for interacting with individuals of equal, higher, or lower status. It is plausible that the primary reason politeness remains uncharted territory for most Egyptologists is that, as a subfield of linguistic pragmatics, it has yet to permeate a discipline that remains rigidly divided between philologists and archaeologists, each adhering to their traditional methodologies. As the editors of this volume, we were pleased to learn that politeness theories, encountered by some contributors for the first time while working on their chapters, have assisted them in achieving a deeper understanding of their texts.

We firmly believe that a comprehensive qualitative analysis of politeness necessitates a case-by-case approach, enabling focused scrutiny and the employment of appropriate methodologies deserving of the sources. Thus, designing corpus-based studies and questions that are restricted to specific periods and genres is crucial. A broader perspective on the evolution of politeness across different historical periods and registers is also desirable, particularly for a civilization like Egypt that primarily utilized a single written language across periods characterized by shifts between centralized and decentralized forms of political organization (Lehner, 2000), external conquests (Marković & Ilić, 2018), and other transformative social changes, such as transitions from matrilineal to patrilineal filiation (Olabarria, 2020, pp. 131–132), collective to individual self-representation (Bassir, 2019), and evolving approaches to the divine and its public commemoration (Weiss, 2012; Baines & Froud, 2011). While historical change is beyond the scope of this volume, we hope that our collection of papers, spanning all major periods of Egyptian history, can either validate,

illuminate, or challenge questions pertaining to various facets of the human experience in ancient Egypt.

In light of these considerations, this collective volume investigates politeness in ancient Egyptian texts from a diachronic standpoint, encompassing the Old Kingdom through Coptic times. We consider different scripts (hieratic, hieroglyphs, demotic, and Coptic), linguistic stages, and genres, exploring their sociocultural implications for our understanding of life and identity in ancient Egypt. This study covers approximately 4,000 years of textual history, incorporating a wide array of textual and multimodal sources. By examining the evolution of linguistic etiquette across periods characterized by varying degrees of individualism and state intervention in private autonomy, we delve into the long-standing debate at the origins of politeness research, posing the question: was politeness a strategic choice or a socially mandated behavior in ancient Egypt?

2. A few key concepts in politeness research

In the view of Watts (2003, p. xi), “writing an introduction to politeness is like being in mortal combat with a many-headed hydra.” Similarly, Leech (2014, p. 43) speaks of a “Babel of contending voices.” Politeness theorizing is indeed many-sided and has caused much ink to flow since the influential model of Brown and Levinson (1978). Yet, this should not prevent us from offering a concise overview of the most frequent frameworks used in this book. The (underlying) idea is neither to present an account nor a skeleton outline of previous politeness-related research (for a mapping of the field, see for instance Christie, 2008; Kádár & Haugh, 2013; or Culpeper et al., 2017). There has been a steady stream of (im)politeness studies since the 70’s. The aim of section 2.1 is rather to pinpoint some basic concepts of the field, which some of our contributors applied but did not explain in detail: facework, volition-discernment, Watt’s polite-politic behaviour, Leech’s pragmatics approach (extended by House and Kádár’s framework), as well as the impoliteness frameworks of Culpeper. While analyzing their ancient corpora through the lenses of (im)politeness, the authors also tested the historical applicability of the existing frameworks. Section 2.2 focuses on the reception of politeness theories in Egyptology and their application(s) to ancient Egyptian data prior to this collective volume (for a literature review of historical pragmatics in general, see Kádár & House (this volume – chapter 1, section 2)).

2.1. (Im)politeness studies & (synchronic) pragmatics

Politeness, in its broad sense, is a “form of communicative behaviour” (Leech, 2014, p. 3). It pops up in dyadic interactions, i.e. with a sender (speaker) and receiver (hearer/addressee), but also in (apparent) monologic texts and triadic communications (with a third party involved). Politeness can be part of verbal as well as nonverbal communication. Most politeness studies have focused on the language because the nonverbal component is sometimes not as easily grasped. Yet, recent studies on modern languages are considering paralinguistic elements like prosody but not so much the kinesics aspect of face-to-face communication (see for instance Ofuka et al., 2000; Culpeper et al., 2003; Culpeper, 2011a; Leech, 2014, p. 44, fn. 12 with further references).

Frameworks and principles of linguistic politeness were and are (re)defined over time because the field is still in its infancy with regards to certain aspects (like nonverbal communication or the inclusion of monologues and third-party involvement). Moreover, interest in the discipline is speedily growing, thus reaching new fields like the study of ancient languages.

This book sets out to ease the communication between researchers working on the ancient world, historical linguistics, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics, but also to engage with advanced students of the humanities and social sciences. With this goal in mind, a few important key concepts are summarized below but one should also refer to the introduction of each paper for detailed presentations of the frameworks and further bibliography.

2.1.1. Facework, volition, and discernment

The year 1978 is a landmark for politeness studies. P. Brown and S. Levinson first published an essay about politeness as strategies of interaction in an edited book of E. Goody (Brown & Levinson, 1978), building on the notion of “face” of Goffman (1955/1967) and the Gricean framework of four maxims (Quality, Quantity, Relevance, and Manner)—or Cooperative Principle (CP)—, defining “the basic set of assumptions underlying every talk exchange” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 95). A decade later, the study was reissued as a book, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which paved the way for a new field of study, politeness research. This model of politeness was meant as a “tool for analysing the quality of social relations” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, back cover) but faced much criticism (see for instance Haugh, 2013 for a questioning of the link between face(work) and (im)politeness, or a reassertion of how the Goffmanian face was neglected). Politeness is conceived as a set of strategies in which the speaker (or, in the ancient world, writer) mitigates an imposition during a linguistic interaction depending on three key sociological factors: “1) the social distance (D) of the speaker and the hearer, 2) the relative power (P) of the speaker and the hearer, 3) the absolute ranking (R) of impositions in the particular culture” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 74). Based on the assumption that “some acts intrinsically threaten face” (therefore “Face Threatening Act,” FTA), the speaker may strategically use formulas indicative of friendliness or deference, opting for directness or indirectness. The former is called “positive politeness,” while the latter is referred to as “negative politeness.” The speaker may also opt for efficiency and directness over politeness, by neither mitigating the threat nor softening its impact (cf. “bald on record FTA” in Table 1), or for non-coercive tactfulness, favoring innuendos with a higher degree of indirectness, being “off-record” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 71-72; see also Sifianou 1997, p. 165). At last, the FTA may be avoided entirely by staying silent, for instance, which leads to communication failure. The core of this model lies in the level of volition of the speaker, in other words, interactions are the result of (strategic) choices made by the speakers.

TABLE 1. The five politeness super-strategies of Brown & Levinson

Brown & Levinson facework (enhancing face)
Five politeness super-strategies
Brown & Levinson (1987, pp. 68-69)

Bald on record FTA
Positive politeness
Negative politeness
Off-record
Withhold the FTA

A concerning bias of the Brown & Levinson model is its Anglo-centrism (see for instance Ye, 2019 for previous literature and in particular fn 2 for her remark about Anglo- vs. Western-centrism) that places too much focus on individual decisions. Indeed, there are many cultures with pre-defined socially imposed rules and culturally recommended linguistic patterns, which the speaker has to follow in specific interactions. Hence, S. Ide coined the term *discernment* (from *wakimae* in Japanese) in her essay “Formal Forms and Discernment. Two Neglected Aspects of Universals of Linguistic Politeness” for such cultures in which social interactions are discerned from the context, with an almost inexistent level of volition (Ide, 1989). *Discernment* quickly became another backbone of politeness research. Yet, perceiving speakers as agentless individuals with no linguistic choice can be seen as over simplistic. Even in highly hierarchized societies, in which “a (linguistic) behaviour is socially and situationally adequate and quasi mandatory” (Ridealgh & Jucker, 2019, p. 57), the language may be used in the strategic sense of Brown and Levinson (1987) (cf. Kádár & House **this volume – chapter 1** but also Kádár & Mill, 2013, p. 138 with further examples in Japanese). Since its first mention in the literature, the notion of *discernment* and its “quasi-mandatory linguistic behaviour” faced criticism and constant re-evaluations (e.g. Watts, 1992; Eelen, 2001; Cook, 2011; Shibamoto-Smith, 2011; Kádár & Mills, 2013). For instance, Ridealgh and Jucker (2019, p. 57) suggest to understand *discernment* politeness, with its sets of recommended linguistic patterns, as an indication of the speakers “awareness of the social context and the power differential between them and their addressees” in (historical) societies with a fixed hierarchical social order. Following Kádár and Mills (2013, p. 140), a distinction should be made between “*wakimae*,” a Japanese concept specific to this linguaculture, and “*discernment*,” used as a cross-cultural (or intercultural) notion (see also Ridealgh & Jucker, (2019) for a distinction between first- and second-order concepts).

After Hill et al. (1986, p. 348), Ide (1989) also defines the pairing notion of “volition,” seemingly characteristic of Western societies, in which the speaker has a high level of volition and resorts to strategic linguistic forms—i.e. the facework theory—. Kádár and Mills (2013, p. 140) speak of the “strategic/manipulative use of politeness” in their re-assessment of *discernment* and “*wakimae*”.

Despite this stream of criticism, Brown & Levinson facework and the pair volition-*discernment* are fuelling (historical) linguistic politeness research while being disentangled, re-evaluated, and re-thought over the years. The field still awaits a replicable framework, ideally for both historical and synchronic politeness (see also Kádár & House **this volume – chapter 1**; Motte **this volume – chapter 3**).

2.1.2. Richard Watts – polite vs. politic behaviour

Richard Watts’ notions of “polite” and “politic” verbal behaviour also exert influence in (historical) linguistic politeness (Watts, 1989, 1992, 2003, 2005). He opposes a “non-politic”

or inappropriate behaviour (negatively marked: impolite/rude but also over-polite) to a “politic” or appropriate behaviour, made of two subsets: a positively marked behaviour (“polite”) and an unmarked one (“non-polite”; see Sojic [this volume - fig. 1](#), after Watts, 2005, p. xliii). He also attempts to make a clear distinction between first- and second-order politeness (or “politeness1” / “politeness2” after Eelen, 2001; see also Grainger, 2011). First-order politeness consists of an emic approach, referring to the viewpoint of individuals from a specific society or culture (insiders, participants or language users). The second order politeness is the etic counterpart, i.e. the point of view of a researcher (outsider, language observer) and their attempt to analyse and interpret the data, sometimes with universalistic theories like Brown & Levinson (for the connection of first and second order politeness with 1st, 2nd, and 3rd waves of politeness, see for instance House & Kádár, 2021, pp. 60-61; for first-order vs. second-order conceptualisations see Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Kádár & Mills, 2013).

As previously highlighted in Ridealgh and Jucker (2019, p. 59), Watts’s notion of “politic behaviour” intersects the second-order concept of discernment, as a form of (linguistic) behaviour acknowledging the speaker’s place in a culture with a fixed hierarchical social order (see also the papers of Lazaridis and Chantrain [in this volume](#)).

2.1.3. Geoffrey Leech – the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects of pragmatics

The pragmatic approach of Leech is another major contribution to politeness studies. Its pioneering work aims at studying the “(social) principles of linguistic behaviour” (Leech, 1983) and, like Brown and Levinson, he draws on the Gricean Cooperative Principle (see 2.1.1). Over the years, until his seminal work *The Pragmatics of Politeness* (2014), whilst he acknowledged the importance of a context-sensitive or socio-culturally oriented approach (sociopragmatics) “judging politeness in context,” he mostly explored politeness through language use (pragmalinguistics; key concepts firstly defined in Thomas, 1983, and Leech, 1983, p. 11; Leech, 2014, pp.13-18, p. 88, and pp. 103-107). Facing criticism and reworking on his previous model (Leech, 1983; 2003; 2007), Leech (2014) offers a new model to cover the (pragm)linguistic aspect of politeness (compare with House & Kádár’s framework (2021) also advocating for a consideration of both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic facets) and tests its applicability with American and British English.

2.1.4. Jonathan Culpeper – (linguistic) impoliteness, a neglected form of facework

Since 1996, Jonathan Culpeper is the leading figure in the field of impoliteness research, with his seminal paper “Towards an Anatomy of Impoliteness.” Building on previous works (e.g. Craig et al., 1986; Lakoff, 1989; Tracy, 1990; Penman, 1990), he aims to offer the first theoretical basis to study hostile communication and to identify strategies used to provoke social disruption. In this view, he starts from the Brown & Levinson five superstrategies of politeness and defines five impoliteness counterpart superstrategies (Table 2).

TABLE 2. The five (im)politeness super-strategies (Brown & Levinson model versus Culpeper’s framework).

Brown & Levinson facework (enhancing face)	Culpeper framework (attaching face)
Five politeness super-strategies	Five impoliteness super-strategies
Brown & Levinson (1987, pp. 68-69)	Culpeper (1996, pp. 356-357) or (2009b)

Bald on record FTA	Bald on record impoliteness
Positive politeness	Positive impoliteness
Negative politeness	Negative impoliteness
Off-record	Sarcasm or mock politeness
Withhold the FTA	Withhold politeness

For over four decades he extensively published on (im)politeness, with inclusion of nonverbal elements like prosody, later shifting his approach to focus on the role of context, thus abandoning Brown & Levinson positive and negative faces (Culpeper, 1998, 2005, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011a, 2011b; Culpeper, Bousfield & Wichmann, 2003; Culpeper et al., 2010; Culpeper & Holmes, 2013; Culpeper, Haugh, & Kádár, 2017). Culpeper (2011b, p. 252) distinguishes “three key, functional types of impoliteness event: affective impoliteness, coercive impoliteness and entertaining impoliteness;” they have “the general function of reinforcing or opposing specific identities, interpersonal relationships, social norms and/or ideologies” (see the papers of Chantrain and Sojic – **this volume** for entertaining and coercive impoliteness). Examples of affective impoliteness should not be confused with over-impoliteness, i.e. banter, used in case of in-group solidarity (cf. Leech, 2014, p. 238 and Motte – this volume for a case of over-impoliteness used as a rude form of endearment). In this case, Culpeper (2005, pp. 252-253) speaks of “ritualised, non-genuine impoliteness.” Affective impoliteness, instead, is for Culpeper (2011b, p. 223) a highly emotional facet of impoliteness by which the speaker conveys their intense feelings of anger or indignation to alter the hearer’s emotions.

Another thought-provoking work in the field is Bousfield (2008), with his lengthy study of impoliteness in face-to-face spoken interaction (for shorter impoliteness studies on linguacultures other than English, see for instance Bravo, 2008 about Spanish or Sifianou, 2019 about Greek). This interest in impoliteness is a response to the extensive criticism of previous politeness theories and frameworks at the dawn of the 2000s that questioned the universal meaning of “politeness” and excessive focus on speaker’s intentions (e.g. Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003), which resulted in the so-called “discursive turn” or “post-modern approach” that sets out to understand how specific cultures define politeness or impoliteness, and what kind of reactions language provokes on the hearers.

2.2. Politeness Theories Applied to Ancient Egyptian Texts

The very first mention of politeness in ancient Egyptian texts is found in a brief paper by S. Sauneron as early as 1950s (Sauneron, 1954-1957) but politeness research and its linguistic frameworks would not appear in Egyptology until half a century later with Sweeney’s discussion of facework politeness in Late Ramesside Letters (Sweeney, 2001). This collection of ancient letters was written in Late Egyptian by the inhabitants of West Thebes (West bank of the modern Luxor) between the end of the New Kingdom and the early Third Intermediate Period (1125 – 1064 BC). From 2011 until now, Ridealgh has taken over this text corpus, which she studies through the lenses of facework and discernment, emphasizing the importance of socially mandated discernment in the Late Ramesside Letters (Ridealgh, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, and 2016; Ridealgh & Jucker, 2019; Ridealgh & Unceta Gómez, 2020). Her most current work explores ritual and its applicability to these same Late Egyptian letters (Ridealgh, 2020).

Almansa-Villatoro's recent PhD dissertation (2022) and forthcoming monograph studied (im)politeness in Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period letters, concluding that the Egyptian politeness of that time was characterized by strategic and intimate uses of the language that emphasize proximity over distance. She has also published a study of facework and discernment on a 3rd millennium letter, in which different strategies of camaraderie (including the use of hints, rhetorical questions, and expressions of sympathy) are complemented by the seemingly mandated and deferential replacement of first- and second-person pronouns with honorifics. In this and other letters of the time, however, the honorifics represent sentiments of mutual care and reciprocal service, metaphorical proximity, and can be strategically invoked or dropped to convey specific intentions (Almansa Villatoro, 2020). The interest in politeness theories and their suitability for a keen comprehension of communication, be it through personal or business letters, is swiftly expanding to other linguistic phases, as in 2nd-millennium BCE letters from Lahun (Autere, 2023) and Coptic dialects of the 6th to the 8th century CE (Müller, 2023 building on the pragmatic approach of Leech, 2014).

3. Structure of the book

Kádár and House introduce the volume with a focus on the distinct challenges encountered by scholars researching pre-modern politeness. They identify two primary issues: 1) the inherent difficulty of contrasting data with elicited information, and 2) the often unnatural and non-interactive nature of available written sources. Despite methodological projects initiated by pragmatists to test the reliability of historical data, the majority concentrate on Medieval and Western corpora, neglecting the ancient world. The authors underscore the necessity of dedicating more attention to conceptualizing a methodological framework for politeness that maintains consistency across different corpora. While scholars of ancient politeness currently argue against the role of strategy and individual choice in ancient sources, advocating for an understanding under Ide's discernment, Kádár and House highlight the heavy criticism this framework has faced. They assert the need to problematize its application.

To address these challenges, Kádár and House propose a ritually anchored framework replicable in ancient corpora. They stress the importance of interpreting data from a bottom-up perspective driven by evidence rather than preconceived ideas. The evidence should be segmented and presented as Ritual Frame Indicating Expressions (RFIEs) and speech acts, with the latter further subdivided into "substantial" (meaningful) and "ritual" (expected) speech acts. According to the authors, a ritual framework is most suitable for approaching ancient data as it accommodates individual strategy, provided the moral order of the specific event is not violated. They proceed to test their framework through two case studies on pre-Common Era Chinese—one of a dialogic nature and the other of a monologic poetic genre. Another benefit of the Ritual approach, according to Kádár and House, is that the often neglected monologic sources (e.g. ancient poems) can be revisited and studied with a consideration of the Systemic Functional concept of "Register."

In the next chapter, Hainline explores the earliest textual corpus of monumentalized ritual utterances known as the Pyramid Texts (from ca. 2432 – 2413 BCE). His focus lies more specifically on the utterances in personal rituals that were addressed to deities and which were spoken by ritual performers. He employs the theoretical framework of facework as an analytical

lens, which he uses to discuss four strategies of positive politeness and negative politeness. One common positive politeness strategy consists of a shared group identity emphasis between the deceased and deities by asserting a kinship (or affiliation) with the divine addressee. He also identified three negative politeness strategies, namely deference, indirect speech acts, and pessimistic hedges.

Motte focuses her study on the multimodal source of speech captions in elite tombs, where visual dialogic scenes are accompanied by written utterances. Specifically, she delves into Old Kingdom conversations among lower-class peers, concentrating on requests and responses. Her research identifies various strategies to emphasize solidarity and in-group identity: familiarizers or endearing vocatives, upgraders, and grounders. Motte's paper highlights that the responses to those requests consistently carry a positive connotation in these captions. It involves either verbal or non-verbal reactions, essentially signifying agreement or affirmation, represented as a definitive "yes." Moreover, it demonstrates that compliance may be increased by adding one or several of the above-listed strategies.

Using ritual and discernment frameworks, Almansa-Villatoro compares living-dead and living-to-living relationships and communication at the end of the 3rd millennium BCE. Her findings show that ancient Egyptians did not use politeness when addressing deceased relatives. Unlike the indirectness that characterizes letters to the living, the letters to the dead state requests explicitly using blunt imperatives and frequent bare second person pronouns. The structure of the letters, however, is heavily ritualized, which shows that politeness with the dead is perhaps not absent, but different. She hypothesizes that strategic politeness in the letters to the dead is made superfluous by the caring attitudes that Egyptians displayed in funerary rituals, and thus politeness might be the living equivalent of ancestors' afterlife care.

With the help of two early Middle Kingdom letters (1961 – 1917 BCE) belonging to the so-called Heqanakht papyri, Allen discusses the phraseology to raise awareness of the social factors involved in written communication and to compare high to low (letter I) and low to high (letter III) relationships, with Heqanakht himself, a ka-priest, alternating superior and inferior statuses.

Lazaridis contends that, despite being developed for modern languages, it is valuable to assess current frameworks of politeness against available ancient sources. To do this, he examines social encounters in Middle Egyptian literature, employing frameworks such as Leech's Grand Strategy of Politeness and Arndt and Janney's Tact. His research is guided by the primary questions of identifying storytelling cues that link the text to characters' use of (im)politeness and understanding how this linguistic behavior intersects with the plot's development or character formation.

In Ridealgh's paper, she departs from conventional notions of dyadic politeness and introduces a method to analyze individuals, beyond the interlocutors, involved in the communicative event as identified and unidentified third-party politeness. Her chosen corpus for study is the New Kingdom Late Ramesside Letters. Ridealgh contends that the dyadic model places undue emphasis on the individual, neglecting the broader context and community, reflecting a Western-centric approach to communication. In her argument, Ridealgh points out that third-party politeness, though sometimes explicitly named in the letters, equally influences communication even when left unnamed. She challenges the distinction between private and

public letters in New Kingdom Egypt, defining the household as a significant third-party participant that not only receives but likely hears the letter as well.

Through the lens of discernment and facework, Chantrain explores two fictional narratives, the Tale of Sinuhe (from ca. 1944 BCE) and the Report of Wenamun (1069 – 735 BCE), looking for hierarchical features in power relationships (use of indirectness and conversational irony/mock-politeness), which question the level of volition in the highly hierarchized society of ancient Egypt.

Sojic's article delves into the New Kingdom Satirical Letter of Hori, which presents a fictitious and mocking exchange between a subordinate scribe, Hori, and a superior royal scribe, Amenemope. In this letter, Hori takes the opportunity to admonish his superior for perceived inappropriate lifestyle choices and incompetence. Sojic's analysis reveals that the letter serves both pedagogic and entertaining purposes. Through its clever language and humor, Hori's letter conveys a clear message that professionalism and fairness should take precedence over hierarchical rights.

Moving on to Demotic literature, Cross uses the lenses of facework to analyze a passage of the story of First Setne, in which the main character, Setne, is addressing someone as being Pharaoh even though it is known that this figure is not the king himself. This study focuses on appearance vs. reality with politeness at stake.

The book concludes with Cromwell and Delattre's examination of the 8th century CE Coptic dossier of the monk Frange from Thebes. This dossier comprises hundreds of letters authored not only by Frange but also by other men and women. The exceptional archive of Monk Frange offers insight into his personality, revealing a significant degree of variation between the letters based on his emotional state or intentions. Cromwell and Delattre also challenges the observation of Culpeper et al. (2003, pp. 1568-1577), Culpeper (2011a, p. 145-152), and Leech (2014, p. 231), according to which paralinguistic features of the spoken language like emotion, intonation, stress, and prosody cannot be written.

4. Strategic or socially mandated politeness?

While the field of (im)politeness in modern pragmatics has progressed beyond the facework-discernment binary that characterized the initial wave of politeness research, the question of strategic versus mandated behavior remains a significant consideration for the study of the ancient world. This complexity is due to the exclusive reliance on textual evidence, making it more susceptible to standardization and formality. Additionally, there persists an often-unchallenged notion in Egyptology that the ancient Egyptian society was notably more hierarchical and rigid than contemporary cultures.

The earliest application of politeness to Egyptian sources by Sweeney (2001, pp. 232–249) framed individual linguistic choices as part of a negotiation involving “cost and benefit” in Late Ramesside Letters. Recent work by Ridealgh (e.g., 2019, pp. 59–60), however, challenges the concept of strategic politeness, asserting that power dynamics in letters are unnegotiable. According to Ridealgh, discernment provides a more helpful model for interpreting ancient Egyptian politeness. Notably, certain linguistic features, such as imperatives, are almost exclusive (but not only, cf. Sweeney, 2001, p. 53) in High-to-Low letters, while others, like honorifics, predominantly appear in letters to superiors.

Ide's concept of discernment has, however, faced criticism within the broader field of pragmatics, as linguacultures associated with discernment, such as the Japanese, are still seen to employ strategic politeness. Kádár's research on Ritual (2017, p. 80) redirects the focus to specific contexts where politeness rules can be bent under certain circumstances with contractual validity. This research emphasizes the non-uniform nature of cultures, highlighting the importance of standardization in ritual contexts promoted by elites (Kádár & Mills, 2013, p. 138).

In this compilation, Kádár and House assert that the Ritual framework is the most appropriate method for studying ancient texts because it takes into account individual choice, flexibility, and strategy in linguistic patterns, even when highly standardized. Their case studies on pre-Common Era Chinese demonstrate that the ritual context of admonitions can overturn the natural order of “subordinates do not criticize superiors.” Moreover, they emphasize that the Book of Odes is not merely an artistic poetic composition but a deeply emotive source for ritual performance with strategic appeals to deities.

Other contributors in this volume, such as Motte, Almansa-Villatoro, and Lazaridis, acknowledge that no single politeness theory can be applied in isolation to the study of ancient cultures. The editors thereby highlight the importance of a data-driven approach in the analysis of politeness and the formulation of the right questions for each corpus. The chapters in this book offer excellent case studies of (im)politeness across various social contexts, textual typologies, linguistic stages, and scripts. Consequently, the volume presents an in-depth, large-scale examination of politeness in its diverse written manifestations throughout 3,000 years of Egyptian history, offering a fresh perspective on the issues of individual choice and the strategization of politeness.

Hainline's study of the Pyramid Texts reveals that utterances in which the deceased king seeks the deities' assistance adhere to expected social patterns of interaction, but there are also passages that subvert power relationships. Examples depict deities bowing before the deceased, fearing them, and even being consumed by them. This juxtaposition of normative and subversive politeness coexists in the corpus with deferential uses of greetings and epithets to address deities. Additionally, instances of clear impoliteness occur in apotropaic spells where harmful entities are driven away through threats and imperatives. Hainline interprets this behavior as an intentional threat to the hostile being and its face, constituting a crucial component of the ritual. Despite Hainline viewing this impoliteness as natural in light of the antagonistic theological position of these creatures, it is noteworthy that a similar rude language is observed in letters addressed to positive ancestors (as discussed below in Almansa-Villatoro). Thus, the unpredictable use of politeness in addressing deities and dangerous beings seems to serve the purpose or emotion-driven agency of the utterances.

Motte observes that requests between socially equal individuals in tomb captions predominantly employ imperatives. Although modern politeness frameworks often define imperatives with reinforcers (or upgraders) as “impolite,” Motte demonstrates that, in the Old Kingdom, this was employed as a strategy to convey camaraderie. Despite recognizing significant variation in the ways requests are expressed, Motte suggests that factors like decorum, material, and space constraints on tomb walls, rather than fully free (im)politeness, might have influenced the length of the captions. Notably, Motte emphasizes that speech captions reflect the elite's perspective on how interactions among peers would have sounded.

This somewhat naive bias is further evident in the absence of a “no” option in responses which are always compliant. Motte's approach underscores the necessity of adapting modern frameworks of (im)politeness to better align with ancient data, rather than attempting to force-fit them into an artificial volition-discernment dichotomy.

Examples of reversed social patterns and the omission of politeness altogether in specific contexts are found in letters to the dead. Almansa-Villatoro illustrates that communication with the deceased established a unique ritual framework where the strategic politeness observed in letters to the living was replaced by written standardization, accompanying oral performances of letter deposition, and, most significantly, the continuous and expected act of caring for deceased ancestors. Ritual care served the functions fulfilled by reciprocal politeness in letters to the living. When the living felt they did not receive the expected reciprocation from the deceased, their response took the form of a letter devoid of facework, featuring outright impolite reminders of social order. In contrast to ritualized and purely transactional letters to the dead, letters to the living in the 3rd millennium BCE exhibit intention-driven strategy and some degree of variation.

Allen's study of Heqanakht's letters exemplifies how the politeness of a single individual can vary even within identical social contexts. Heqanakht alternates between imperatives and polite subjunctives or necessitatives, coupling overt threats with considerations of his dependents' time limitations and challenges. Despite this unpredictability, the letters generally reveal that greetings, honorifics, and other more standardized features were linked to specific hierarchical communications.

Lazaridis acknowledges that politeness in written texts primarily represents elite culture, which, in Egypt, was dominated by literati. Thus, there is an interest in reinforcing the existing social system and hierarchy. He, however, demonstrates that poetic license allowed text composers to deviate and even criticize social norms and rhetorical style. Furthermore, identical social scenarios in the same texts may be portrayed differently to convey personality and intentions. For example, while in the Tales of Wonder, King Khufu is cordial to Djedi, his father Snofru is blunt to Djadjaemankh. Both depict king-subordinate interactions at court, but the latter helps the audience visualize Snofru's bad mood. Indeed, he concludes that perplexing (im)polite behavior is often a literary device used to convey emotional status in texts that do not normally explicitly describe characters' feelings and personality.

Ridealgh's consideration of the household as a third-party member of communication in Late Ramesside Letters suggests that politeness did not solely impact the letter's producer and receiver but also their broader community. Individual face is thus superseded by the Face of the Head of the Household, who is personally accountable for the household's self-image. In her analysis, the household's positive evaluation of a letter depends on a communal understanding of hierarchical respect and the maintenance of superior-subordinate roles. Only superiors can freely evaluate subordinates, so if a lower-rank individual receives a critical letter, their household's evaluation would likely align with the superior's critique. Therefore, while she recognizes that letters' receptions and evaluations can have positive or negative impacts on individuals, these assessments are determined by their adherence to unnegotiable social rules.

Chantrain directs attention to linguistic methods of bypassing hierarchy in her analysis of indirectness and conversational irony in the stories of Sinuhe and Wenamun. In both tales, the Egyptian main characters find themselves in foreign lands, interacting with outsiders who

should, in theory, recognize the authority of Egypt. Instead, the realities that Sinuhe and Wenamun encounter portray the Egyptians as inferiors, seemingly criticizing the central power through the use of unexpected household metaphors, irony, and shifts between subordinate motion (centripetal verbs) and controlling motion (centrifugal verbs). Similar to Lazaridis, Chantrain demonstrates that impolite behavior can function as a literary device to capture the audience's imagination and convey humor, satire, or even political messages challenging power. She raises the question of how much of this subversive behavior could genuinely be perceived as "Face-Threatening" rather than an intentional "debate rhetoric" framed within a broader use of irony and sarcasm as part of the Egyptian pedagogic approach to contextual learning.

In a similar vein, Sojic's approach to the Satirical Letter of Hori reveals how traditional hierarchical patterns can be reversed in pedagogic literature with specific scopes. Hori's admonishing letter to his superior, Amenemope, is triggered by the latter's inappropriate structure, language, style, and insulting tone in a letter addressed to the former. Hori even complains about not having been greeted at the start of the missive. According to Sojic, what has angered Hori is that Amenemope was not respectful of the professional context of their interaction. Sojic accepts that individuals can have not only one face but several, including their work image, and that they have different needs. Therefore, even if Amenemope is a superior, his initial letter to Hori in a working context was perceived by the latter as an act of impoliteness, warranting his admonishing response—an act of reactive impoliteness. This subversive politeness, according to Sojic, is the byproduct of a reciprocity-based system. Hori reproaches Amenemope for not seeing him as a "scribe," implying that the royal scribe does not consider him an equal, even though they are obviously colleagues. Therefore, it is Hori's professional face as a scribe that has been damaged in this interaction, and in his attempt to avenge it, he oversteps any pre-existing social hierarchy.

Once again, the use of politeness as an extratextual layer of information in literary stories is examined by Cross in his analysis of Setne's encounter with a false pharaoh in the Demotic tale of Setne-Khamuas I. After waking up from a nightmarish hallucination, Setne finds himself lying naked in the desert in front of an important person described to be "in the likeness of the pharaoh." Despite this person clearly not being the pharaoh, Setne addresses him as such. Cross aligns with those who have previously argued that this figure is none other than the ghost of Naneferkaptah himself, who wants to teach Setne a lesson for stealing the Scroll of Thoth. Although this fact is strongly suggested in the dialogue, it is never explicitly stated in the story. Cross demonstrates that the story's audience would have been able to reach this realization by analyzing Naneferkaptah-Pharaoh's third-person reference to the pharaoh as an off-record strategy to correct Setne without causing any more harm to his already damaged face.

More variation at the individual level is perceptible in the extensive Coptic dossier of monk Frange, as demonstrated by Cromwell and Delattre. The monk violates politeness codes when he is angry and wishes to express it. In such instances, he shortens or completely omits polite epistolary formulae, skips the addressee's name, and diverges from the traditional form and layout of letters. Sometimes, he even writes reproaches in a larger size, as if attempting to convey the impression of shouting. In Frange's correspondence, impoliteness serves two distinct performative functions: displaying discontent and unsettling the addressee. Besides

Frange's personality, his sister Tsie's unique ways of demonstrating politeness and self-deprecation to persuade the monk in her letters also contribute to characterizing her. According to Cromwell and Delattre's analysis, this is a style that she did not impose on other women when writing letters on their behalf.

In summary, the papers collected in this volume reveal two distinct scenarios. One scenario, prevalent in letters, demonstrates higher levels of standardization and hierarchy-driven language. The other scenario, more pronounced in literary texts, involves playing with and reversing usual patterns to create a dramatic impact. Despite the differences, (im)politeness in all corpora appears to serve specific intentions, whether to persuade, save face, or convey critique. Even within the most hierarchical texts, such as letters, there is observable variation and a certain degree of freedom of choice. Specific Ritual Frame Indicating Expressions (RFIEs) like honorifics and greetings seem less negotiable in letters, but otherwise, the producer's intention remains crucial. Indeed, hierarchy does not necessarily restrict specific behaviors, such as requests or complaints.

Outside of RFIEs, letters do not exhibit standardization and display instead a high degree of variation. The exception to this is letters to the dead, which are highly standardized and adhere to an unnegotiable ritual framework. Ritual, however, can encompass overt impoliteness directed against harmful and supposedly beneficial entities, as evident in the apotropaic Pyramid Texts rituals and in the letters to the dead, respectively.

Hierarchies are more frequently challenged in literature, possibly serving as part of a pedagogic device, as suggested by both Chantrain and Sojic. A specific case is the speech captions of conversations between low-ranking individuals from wealthy tombs, which, rather than representing real interactions, may reflect a biased perception of low-class manners through the elite's eyes. Even in these instances, linguistic variability is apparent, highlighting the challenges in projecting our etic ideological perception of the Egyptian social order onto ancient inscriptions.

The impact of hierarchy on linguistic communication in Egypt outside of RFIEs is not entirely clear and should not be assumed a priori. Impolite behavior in low-to-high communication is evident in ritual (Almansa-Villatoro; Hainline), work (Sojic), teaching (Chantrain), and emotive (Lazaridis) contexts. While much of this language of contestation is reserved for literary or fictitious contexts, complaints to superiors in real work letters are not unattested either (GEM 3217 = Gardiner, 1927). Future research on (im)politeness in Egyptian texts should consider the context of interaction and the producer's intentions in tandem with, or perhaps above, hierarchical differences.

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