

# Using the Devil with Courtesy: Shakespeare and the Language of (Im)Politeness (Linguistic Insights Book 253)

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Using the Devil with Courtesy

Shakespeare and the Language of (Im)Politeness

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About the book

Renaissance England was marked by a pervasive culture of courtesy. The research hypothesis of this book is that verbal courtesy, for historical and social reasons involving social mobility and the crisis produced by the clash between different systems of thought (Humanism, Catholicism, Protestantism, new scientific discourses), soon became *strategic language*, characterised by specific forms of facework detectable through the patterns of politeness and impoliteness employed by speakers.

Adopting a historical pragmatic perspective, *Using the Devil with Courtesy* semantically and conceptually connects courtesy and (im)politeness to analyse Renaissance forms of (im)politeness through Shakespeare. Drawing on a methodological line of research running from Goffman (1967) and Grice (1967), to Brown and Levinson (1987), Jucker (2010) and Culpeper (2011), the book focuses specifically on *Hamlet* (c. 1601) and *The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1594) with three principal aims: 1) to survey the (im)polite strategies used by the characters; 2) to explore how this language connects to a specific Renaissance subjectivity; 3) to link language and subjectivity to extra-textual (historical and semiotic) factors.

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I am one of those gentle ones

that will use the devil himself with courtesy.

(W. Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 4. 2. 32–33)

Table of Contents

[List of Abbreviations](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Introduction](#)

[0.1&nbsp;&nbsp; Talk, text and subjectivity – a pragmatic approach](#)

[0.2&nbsp;&nbsp; Linguistic methodology](#)

[0.3&nbsp;&nbsp; Outline of the book](#)

[Chapter One:&nbsp;&nbsp; Introducing \(im\)politeness](#)

[1.&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Defining the concepts of politeness and impoliteness](#)

[1.1&nbsp;&nbsp; Politeness: early studies](#)

[1.2&nbsp;&nbsp; A face-based model: Brown and Levinson](#)

[1.2.1&nbsp;&nbsp; Positive and negative face](#)

[1.2.2&nbsp;&nbsp; B&L's politeness strategies](#)

[1.3&nbsp;&nbsp; Discursive approaches to politeness](#)

[1.4&nbsp;&nbsp; A theory of impoliteness](#)

[1.4.1&nbsp;&nbsp; Contextual factors, \(non\)-inherent meaning and conventionalisation](#)

[Chapter Two:&nbsp;&nbsp; \(Im\)politeness and the Early Modern period](#)

[2.1&nbsp;&nbsp; Contextualising historical pragmatics and Early Modern \(im\)politeness](#)

[2.1.1&nbsp;&nbsp; Historical events and newhistoricist perspectives](#)

[2.1.2&nbsp;&nbsp; Subjectivity and the Renaissance](#)

[2.1.3   Language and semiosis](#)

[2.2   Diachronic definitions of politeness terms and strategies](#)

[2.2.1   Politeness terms from a diachronic perspective](#)

[2.2.2   Politeness and language strategies from the Anglo-Saxon period to the 18th century](#)

[2.3   Politeness as a sociocultural practice](#)

[2.4   Second-order politeness and Shakespeare](#)

[2.5   Method](#)

[2.5.1   Politeness markers](#)

[2.5.2   Discernment vs strategic politeness](#)

[2.5.3   Sociological variables](#)

[2.5.4   General procedure](#)

[Chapter Three:   Speaking daggers: \(Im\)polite strategies in \*Hamlet\*](#)

[3.1   Routine courtesy: the forms of discernment politeness](#)

[3.1.1   Bernardo and Francisco](#)

[3.1.2   King Claudius: introducing variable RF \(reflexivity\)](#)

[3.1.3   Powerful characters and variable A](#)

[3.1.4   The Gravedigger: from discernment to strategic \(im\)politeness](#)

[3.2   Courtesy as ambition](#)

[3.2.1   The deadly politeness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern](#)

[3.2.2   Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at work](#)

[3.2.3   Playing a pipe](#)

[3.3   Off-record Hamlet](#)

[3.3.1   The fishmonger: splitting words](#)

[3.3.2   Switching positions](#)

[3.4   Summary](#)

[Chapter Four:   The gendering of \(im\)politeness: \*The Taming of the Shrew\*](#)

[4.1   The Induction: \(im\)politeness and identity construction](#)

[4.2   Sly, the Lord](#)

[4.3   Katherina and Bianca: impoliteness vs obedience](#)

[4.4   Katherina and Petruccio: introducing mock politeness](#)

[4.5   The Taming](#)

[4.6   Summary](#)

[Conclusions:   The sense of \(im\)politeness](#)

[References](#)

[Index](#)

□ 10 | 11 □

[List of Abbreviations](#)

- A** Affect variable
- B&L** Brown and Levinson
- BR** Bald on Record
- BRS** Bald on Record Strategy
- CA** Conversation Analysis
- CC** Conversational Contract
- CP** Cooperation Principle
- D** Distance variable
- DA** Discourse Analysis
- DM** Discourse Marker
- DP** Discernment Politeness
- DT** Derogatory Term
- FTA** Face Threatening Act
- H** Hearer
- IBR** Impolite Bald on Record
- IP** Irony Principle
- NA** Nominal Address (titles, first and last names)
- NI** Negative Impoliteness
  - NI1 Frighten
  - NI2 Condescend, scorn, ridicule
  - NI3 Invade the other's space
  - NI4 Explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect
  - NI5 Put the other's indebtedness on record
- NP** Negative Politeness
  - N1 Be conventionally indirect
  - N2 Question, hedge
  - N3 Be pessimistic
  - N4 Minimise the imposition
  - N5 Give deference
  - N6 Apologize
  - N7 Impersonalise S and H

- N8 State the FTA as a general rule (to soften the offence)
- N9 Nominalise
- N10 Go on record as incurring a debt □ 11 | 12 □
- OFF-R** Off Record
- ON-R** On Record
- P** Power variable
- PA** Pronominal Address (you/thou)
- PI** Positive Impoliteness
  - MP Mock politeness
  - PI1 Ignore, snub the other
  - PI2 Exclude the other from activity
  - PI3 Dissociate from the others
  - PI4 Be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic
  - PI5 Use inappropriate identity marker
  - PI6 Use obscure or secretive language
  - PI7 Seek disagreement
  - PI8 Make the other feel uncomfortable
  - PI9 Use taboo words
  - PI10 Call the other names
- PM** Politeness Markers
- PP** Positive Politeness
  - P1 Notice, attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, goods)
  - P2 Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)
  - P3 Intensify interest to H
  - P4 Use in-group identity markers
  - P5 Seek agreement
  - P6 Avoid disagreement
  - P7 Assert common ground
  - P8 Joke
  - P9 Assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants
  - P10 Offer, promise
  - P11 Be optimistic
  - P12 Include both S and H in the activity
  - P13 Give (or asks) reasons
  - P14 Assume or assert reciprocity
  - P15 Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)
- R** Rank of imposition (riskiness)
- RF** Reflexive variable
- S** Speaker

□ 12 | 13 □

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Finally, thanks to my friends and family, and especially to my daughter Federica, to whom this book is dedicated. □ 13 | 14 □

□ 14 | 15 □

## [Introduction](#)

When Hamlet is about to meet Gertrude in the 'closet scene' to tell her how much he disapproves of her, he says: "I will speak daggers to her but use none" (3. 2. 386). This remark relies on a *distinction* between deeds and words, expressing an intention to hurt his mother without actually killing her. At the same time, the metaphor establishes a *link* between what Hamlet is saying and what he is doing, since it has a considerable effect on the interlocutor; indeed, at the end of the exchange, Gertrude repeats the metaphor, deploying the very same expression used by her son: "O speak to me no more! / These words like daggers enter in my ears. / No more, sweet Hamlet" (3. 4. 92–94). The painful effect of Hamlet's words on Gertrude is conveyed through a bodily image (the ears) that gives an impression of *physical* pain. Hence, words have actually performed actions as if they were weapons (daggers). What is the nature of this linguistic performativity? In what ways can it be related to verbal (im)politeness? What does it reveal about the subjectivity underlying it? These questions, which arise at the interface of talk, behaviour and subjectivity within Renaissance culture, are the main focus of study in this book.

### [0.1&nbsp;&nbsp; Talk, text and subjectivity – a pragmatic approach](#)

In order to address the key question of how to analyse such a complex network of interconnecting problems, we need to start from some general considerations about our perception and analysis of talk and text.

As regards spoken language, interactive communication is usually experienced by speakers as a 'natural' act, needed to convey ideas and emotions, and to structure interpersonal relationships of various kinds. If the mechanisms underlying speech are almost unconscious in their practical realisation, the awareness that conversation is a linguistic □ 15 | 16 practice embedded at different levels in every cultural, social and subjective process is the basis on which the various branches of linguistics have developed since the 1960s. Sociology has played a role in this respect, particularly Goffman's theory of face (1967) – the image that each person has of him/herself. This image is variously affected by encounters with others and becomes a site of negotiation between subjects, their ego and the culture to which they belong. In the interconnection between these elements, language has become a privileged arena of investigation, especially since the evolution of Austin's theory of speech acts, which developed in the 1960s. Austin demonstrated that language not only *tells* us about the world, but also creates it by virtue of a *performative* force that allows words to *do* things. Since then, language performativity has become central to research on spoken interaction, in fields such as conversation analysis (CA) and discourse analysis (DA), which became increasingly interested in verbal interaction as the main site of the *formation* of subjectivity rather than simply of its *expression*.

At the level of the text, after the spread of the poststructuralist methodology and of critical trends (newhistoricist, cultural materialism, cultural studies) aimed at exploring the political and ideological demands converging in or emerging from texts, the study of subjectivity, of language



and of cultural contexts has been informed by the idea that every communicative event is 'textualisable' and that textuality is marked not only by the creation/expression of meanings but also by their *interpretation* and reception. Texts, therefore, should not only be understood as the product (form plus content) of the communicative event but also as a space informing and interconnecting – more or less creatively – elements such as the speaker, the hearer, the language and the context.

The critical methodologies studying the interconnection between subjects, cultures and languages have been applied to texts both from a synchronic and a diachronic perspective. Diachronically, a long-standing debate on the need to historicise subjectivity has led to a focus on the Renaissance as a historical period in which a new sense of the Self emerged: the early modern subject felt entangled within a network of cultural and social forces still looking back at the *medieval* past, whilst starting to imagine and express a kind of *premodern* individuality, located at the interface between the feudal condition of being subjected to a □ 16 | 17 □ power coming from above and the urge to claim a status as an active subject, endowed with a certain degree of agency and power coming from below and from within. As Greenblatt notably suggested in his seminal *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), the Renaissance is the moment at which human subjects started feeling remarkably unfree, constrained into identity-positions determined by the social systems in force, whence – one could assume – sprang a quest for an autonomous Self, detached (in the Cartesian sense) from the world. Among the reasons for the emergence of this urge towards self-determination were the dissemination of new forms of knowledge – tied to Protestantism and to the birth of scientific discourses – and an unprecedented social mobility, fuelled by the economical transformations that would later lead to the definitive rise of the middle classes. Though under the surveillance of the Monarchy, the potential for ascending the social ladder led to the radicalization of specific behaviours connected to the culture of *courtesy*. Far from being merely an ideal of perfect courtly behaviour, courtesy was a practice that influenced the positioning and recognition of individuals in society, through ways of speaking, of properly addressing others and of efficaciously presenting one's opinions at court as well as in other contexts.

The research hypothesis adopted in this book is that subjectivity, language and culture in the Renaissance are interconnected through courtesy. Indeed, this study conjectures that practising courtesy is one of the factors that favoured the emergence of the premodern subjectivity discussed above, inasmuch as *verbal courtesy* soon became *strategic language*, implied not only in the construction of one's social role – and, through this social role, of one's identity – but also in the interpretation of others at a time of religious persecutions and cultural unrest. More importantly, the strategic language used to fashion the self as a public persona may have had a role in triggering an unparalleled exploration of the territories of inwardness, harbouring intentions and motivations that, for political reasons, often had to be different from the words used. The differential between what was thought and what was said, alongside the obsession with the social image of the self are considered in this study as the basis on which specific forms of *facework* (in the Goffmanian sense) emerged, detectable particularly in the patterns of politeness and impoliteness employed by speakers. □ 17 | 18 □

Hence, *this book examines Renaissance verbal courtesy and/as strategic language through a pragmatic methodology drawing on the theory of (im)politeness*: on the one hand recalling the semantic evolution in current English of the word "courtesy" (and its opposite), whilst on the other adopting the theorisations and set of tools used to examine linguistic phenomena aimed at protecting or attacking people's social image. This methodology, developed in the wake of Goffman's development of the notion of 'face' (1967), Grice's identification of the Cooperative Principle (1967) and Lakoff's introduction of a Politeness Principle (1973), was coherently expressed among others by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Culpeper (2011), who will be the main reference points in this study.

Given the diachronic/historical dimension of this research topic, the object of analysis is written language, since we obviously have no recordings of the natural language of the time; among the available genres, drama – and in particular the Shakespearean corpus – has been considered particularly valuable for its conversational structure based on spoken face-to-face interaction. Specifically, *Hamlet* and *The Taming of the Shrew* were selected as they offer different insights into (im)politeness: *Hamlet* presents a variety of courtly behaviours and strategic exchanges among members of the aristocracy (with few exceptions) revolving around a male protagonist, a Prince, whose (im)polite interactions with others reveals traces of the huge existential revolution taking place in early modern times. *The Shrew* complements these elements by presenting the verbal behaviours of the lower social classes, proposing reflections on how language and (im)politeness concur to fashion a female subject.

## [0.2   Linguistic methodology](#)

Given the complexity of the object of this analysis (courtesy/(im)politeness and subjectivity), the historical period (the Renaissance) and the medium of analysis (the Shakespearean text; written speech), *individual* critical approaches such as literary or cultural studies, pragmatics or semiotics, sociology or new historicism are unlikely to be particularly fruitful if used in isolation. Besides, the linguistic analysis of literary texts requires an evaluation that takes into account their aesthetic quality as well as other factors of help in identifying pragmatic meanings. What is needed, then, is an *interdisciplinary* approach to the literary text, incorporating insights from linguistic analyses of text and talk: this book will seek to delineate and apply a methodology of this kind. The book follows a standard pragmatic procedure, using short textual sequences as qualitative data for analysing how and why characters use polite or impolite strategies. It then seeks to explain these sequences in a wider context by interpreting emerging patterns of politeness strategies in relation to the Renaissance sign-system and its cultural-historical specificity and significance.

Using this overall framework, the book pursues three specific aims: 1) to analyse the language of politeness in two of Shakespeare's plays; 2) to explore how this language connects to a specific Renaissance subjectivity; 3) to link language and subjectivity to extra-textual – historical and cultural – elements. From a methodological perspective, then, the book works in two ways: first it applies – and tests the applicability of – recent theories of (im)politeness to the Shakespearean text and second, it seeks to re-evaluate these (im)politeness findings in relation to their cultural-historical context.

## [0.3   Outline of the book](#)

The book is divided into four chapters. The first defines the pragmatic methodology to be used for the textual analysis and its application to the Renaissance, outlining the development of the theory of (im)politeness from the 1970s to 2010s. The first part of the chapter introduces the complex nature of politeness studies to show the importance of an interdisciplinary approach. It explores the connection between Goffman's sociological identification of 'face' and its later deployment in linguistics, as well as aspects of politeness theory relating to Austin's and Searle's speech-act theory and to Lakoff's and Leech's Politeness Principles. The second part focuses in detail on the 'discursive turn' taken by politeness studies since the 1990s and on Culpeper's more recent approach to (im)politeness. \*

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Renaissance England was marked by a pervasive culture of courtesy. The research hypothesis of this book is that *verbal courtesy*, for historical and social reasons involving social mobility and the crisis produced by the clash between different systems of thought (Humanism, Catholicism, Protestantism, new scientific discourses), soon became *strategic language*, characterised by specific forms of facework detectable through the patterns of politeness and impoliteness employed by speakers.

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