

Politeness in the History of English

The concept of politeness permeates all aspects of modern life and society. However, to what extent has this phenomenon changed over time? This book traces the elusive concept of politeness from its beginnings in the Middle Ages up to the present day. Detailed case studies of mostly literary texts provide insights into historically specific ways of being polite, from discernment politeness in Old English to recent examples, such as non-imposition politeness. Readers will gain a better understanding of both the folk notion of politeness and specific scholarly definitions, and how these can be applied to historical data. The long diachrony provides a novel perspective both on the concept of politeness and on the history of the English language in its social context, making this essential reading for politeness specialists, cultural historians and historical linguists alike. Politeness emerges as a multifaceted phenomenon that is both culture-specific and history-specific.

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From the Middle Ages to the Present Day

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Preface

This book makes a bold attempt to trace the elusive concept of politeness in the history of the English language from the Middle Ages to the present day. Needless to say, this volume is only one of many different possible histories of politeness in the English language. It could be visualised as a photo album with many different pictures of an extended road trip. It contains pictures taken along the way, both close-ups of interesting details and long-shot panoramas of entire sceneries. The close-ups may be more or less typical for the place at which they were taken but they do not reveal the full picture, while the long shots provide a more comprehensive picture of the scenery but do not provide the details. The album includes pictures taken at popular points where many other people travelling along the same road have stopped before to take a picture, but it also includes pictures that are more personal at locations that have so far not been detected by many. On several occasions, it includes pictures that others have taken, possibly with older cameras (i.e. older theoretical frameworks). They can reveal interesting details even if they are in monochrome rather than the full range of colours. On some stretches of the journey, the album follows a leisurely pace with many pictures. At other places it just cruises on for long stretches with only cursory glances at the changing scenery. Many others have travelled along some parts of this road before me and have published their travel impressions, and indeed my own account is indebted to many of them. But so far, I believe, nobody has published an account of the entire journey from the earliest beginnings of the English language up to the present day.

My own excursions into the history of politeness started almost fifteen years ago when I became interested in the use of the address terms *ye* and *thou* in Middle English and later in Early Modern English. My interest expanded to other aspects of politeness and to other periods in the history of English until it became feasible to try to fill in some of the remaining gaps and to combine the earlier studies with more recent work in order to sketch out a long diachrony of politeness.

This book integrates extracts of previously published work. All the chapters that contain earlier work specify its origins. In two cases, the previously

published work was co-authored and I am very grateful to my co-authors, Larssyn Staley (Chapter 2) and Irma Taavitsainen (Chapter 4 and Chapter 7), for granting me permission to reuse some of that work in this context. I also thank all the editors and publishers of my previously published work to allow me to reuse extracts from those publications.

The cover illustration of this book depicts a scene from the eighteenth century. The original is a hand-coloured mezzotint entitled ‘The polite macaroni presenting a nosegay to Miss Blossom’ and was published in 1772 in London. It was meant as a satire on a dandy who imitated continental fashions. As such, it illustrates the concerns of this book in multiple ways. The eighteenth century was the time when politeness became an ideology (see Chapters 7 and 8) and an issue of social class, here vividly represented in the difference between the flamboyant dress of the upper-class couple and the plain dress of the street vendor. While aristocratic polite society claimed ‘politeness’ as their preserve that distinguished them from the lesser classes, the rising middle class insisted on moral behaviour that was superior to the hollow surface of etiquette and politeness. Thus, the image represents politeness in a particularly important historical and social context together with its ambivalent character between desirable behaviour and butt of satire.

Over the years, many people have helped me to shape my thinking about politeness in the history of English, and I wish to thank all of them from the bottom of my heart, even if they are too numerous to be mentioned individually here. Most of them can easily be found in the list of references at the end of this book. Two people, however, deserve a particular word of thanks: Magdalena Leitner and Mirjam Schmalz. They have read the entire manuscript in painstaking detail and have saved me from numerous blunders and infelicities. All remaining errors, needless to say, are my own.