

You Can Say You to Me

English Politeness from the Middle Ages up to Now

An Overview

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Abstract: The fact that English does not have two address pronouns compared to other languages such as German or French, can be misleading for foreigners. This paper introduces how it came about that one form got lost and what other forms of politeness are used in the (British) English language. Another part of address terms and titles is insulting and swearing, which could be regarded as the antithesis to politeness. Fifteen hundred years of addressing, insulting and swearing are used as a source to explain how today's politeness conventions have been established over time. Politeness is conventional, and thus is an important factor of communicative competence.

1. Introduction

‘You can say you to me’ – a famous quotation of the former German chancellor Helmut Kohl; as we can see from this example, politeness conventions in the English language do not seem to be successfully mastered by everybody... this is so in part because address terms underwent constant changes throughout the history of the English language; with the confusion aroused by such changes, the use of politeness patterns is handled in a somewhat uncertain manner, especially for speakers of English as a Foreign Language since in many languages - unlike English - there are still two pronouns for addressing other people in a formal and in an informal way. In the English language, though, the formal address term was dropped a long time ago.

Some questions arise from the principles exposed: how in such a democratic language as English can one express reserve on a delicate topic or reverence and respect towards a person regarded as deserving of such an approach? How were these politeness conventions applied throughout the history of the English language? And above all, what do we mean when we speak about politeness? It is our aim to expose these issues a little further and discuss them in our paper.

But before we go into details about the development of English politeness, let us have a look at the method linguistics use for their research on the use of language.

2. Historical Pragmatics

2.1. The Study of Language Use

The growing interest in language use in recent years resulted in the constitution of a new field in linguistic inquiry called PRAGMATICS (Jucker 2000: 90) Jucker defines the term pragmatics as ‘the study of language use’. Pragmatics is one approach to language within the broad field of linguistic studies that ranges from discourse analysis to speech act theory and from the study of presuppositions to relevance theory. Its main focus is on communication and on how language functions in direct contact when people talk to each other. It takes into account several aspects, such as the immediate circumstances in which the linguistic phenomena occur, the social backgrounds and relationships between the speakers, as well as the cognitive processes that define how language is produced and interpreted.

With changes in the social structures (industrialization, technical revolution, urbanization etc.) comes also change in the tradition of language. Historical linguistics is concerned with the investigation of earlier stages of a language and its diachronic development. HISTORICAL pragmatics combines the methodologies of historical linguistics and pragmatics (Jucker 2000: 90). It studies the changes in linguistic structure that result from the steadily altering communicative needs due to these changes of the historical and social context.

2.2. Data

Pragmatics usually works with spoken data, because it is mostly spontaneous and more representative for real life situations than written data. Obviously historical pragmatics has to rely on written sources, because it lacks historical natural language data. But even though the language of the past cannot be investigated through direct observation, researchers work with data that consist of recorded or fictional dialogues that form accurate accounts of spoken language in past times. Such written records of spoken language exist in form of personal letters or dialogues found in plays or fiction. Studies about the conversational behaviour of earlier times can rely on a whole range of sources including manuals on good behaviour and politeness, language teaching books and booklets on the art of conversation. These sources give

detailed information on traditional politeness conventions and on appropriate behaviour in certain conversational situations. Linguists of historical pragmatics use the verbal interactions in Shakespeare's plays to analyse the use of address titles and politeness forms.

2.3. Types of Pragmatics

Within the field of historical pragmatics Jucker distinguishes two possible frameworks for research (Jucker 1995: 11): One is the study of language while focusing on historical data from one particular stage of time. This kind of synchronic contrastive pragmatics compares the linguistic features and how they are used in different languages. It describes the contextual aspects or communicative environment of historical texts as well as the entire socio-historical context in which they are written. This method is called PRAGMAPHILOLOGY (Jucker 1995: 11). The other is the diachronic approach to pragmatics which comments on the development of certain linguistic phenomena. Within DIACHRONIC PRAGMATICS (Jucker 1995: 13) Jucker further distinguishes between two subtypes: One type is the DIACHRONIC FUNCTION TO FORM MAPPING which take a linguistic function as a starting point in order to investigate its development throughout the history of English language (Jucker 1995: 19): A research could for instance start with a particular speech function, such as politeness or a specific speech act, in order to investigate the changing realizations of this function across time. The alternative method would be to take a linguistic form (discourse markers, relative pronouns, a phrase etc.) and trace its pragmatic function and changing discourse meanings through history. This is called DIACHRONIC FORM-TO-FUNCTION MAPPING (Jucker 1995: 13) The address terms *you* and *thou* have been of great significance in the study of pragmatics and are thus a good example to illustrate the diachronic approach of form-to-function pragmatics.

As we can see, historical pragmatics is also an important and helpful method to explore the development of English politeness. After the explanation about the techniques linguistic use, we now can look at English politeness itself. The first question of all is:

3. What Is Politeness?

3.1. Distance, Power and Imposition

Politeness is an aspect of pragmatics in that its use in language is determined by an external context. This external context is the context of communication, which is

determined by the social status of the participants: politeness is a system used by the speaker in order to keep up to the addressee's expectations.

According to Grundy's account (Grundy 1995: 135) we are told that the determiners of the need to use politeness strategies are three: distance, power and Imposition. Imposition covers every action (by this we also mean speech acts) which threatens the addressee's autonomy and freedom of action and usually is conveyed in the form of an order; power is evaluated in terms of numerous factors such as position in society and age; distance implies the evaluation of the other's place in the world, degree of familiarity and/or solidarity towards the addressee. We will focus on the last two features (power and distance) to explore the historical evolution of address terms - titles, names, address pronouns- as well as that of swearing and insulting (see chapter V).

3.2. Show Me Your Face...

Politeness is not only expressed in oral interactions but also in one's behaviour. Brown and Levinson (B&L) speak of the model of the *face-threatening behaviour* (in Grundy 1995: 133). The model defends that everyone has a FACE that is self-esteem which is to put danger in a communication situation. According to this theory, patterns of politeness try to avoid this effect on the addressee and they do so in two different ways: by appealing to his/her POSITIVE FACE that is, acknowledging one's need for communion, or to his/her NEGATIVE FACE that is, acknowledging the other the need for autonomy and freedom of action. B&L speak of POSITIVE POLITENESS, if the speaker tries to strengthen his positive face by using special oral expressions as for example INTENSIFYING MODIFIERS (*how absolutely marvellous*) (Schulze 1985: 84). We call this the STRATEGY OF APPROACH and for this we use a familiar language (between friends) or the rules of politeness, the so called a 'make A feel good-be friendly' (R. Lakoff. 1979 in Schulze 1985: 84). When the speaker on the other hand marks distance in his oral utterances, he strengthens his negative face. Thus, he uses the STRATEGY OF DISTANCE; his communication consists of hedged information (he uses words like *may, presume, probably, I believe that...* or modal verbs like *want to, would like to...*). These hedged utterances stress that the speaker does not want to get involved too much.

Also forms of honour and address terms tell a lot about the need of distance or involvement and also about deference, as we will see in the next chapter.

4. Address Terms

4.1. Titles and Names in Historical England

In the late medieval and early modern England, status had a greater value than nowadays and society was structured in a more hierarchical way. This hierarchy depended mostly on one's origin. The position in society was indicated by one's title that positioned the person in one of the three existing estates, which formed society in medieval England: the clergy, the nobility, and the labourers. Later, society gradually developed into a more complex system: the owning of land divided the people into different classes (Jucker 2000: 84).

Land owners were called the GENTRY, the others were the NON-GENTRY. The term GENTLEMAN developed from this expression for a land owner. In the sixteenth century this term extended its meaning and referred to a man who could live a comfortable life without working (Jucker 2000: 84; Fernell 2001: 162)

In Early Modern English, FIRST NAMES were only used when there was a great intimacy between the addresser and the addressee. First plus LAST NAME was used more frequently than first name alone but it was still only used by people who were familiar with each other. For example, a first name could have been used by sisters and brothers and first plus last name by intimate friends (Fernell 2001:162).

When people addressed a person for the first time they used the highest title the other person could merit in order to be polite. It was also respectful to vary the formulation of the honorific within a single conversation, as with *your lordship* vs. *my honourable good lord* (Fernell 2001: 163).

Titles and OCCUPATIONAL TERMS were used quite frequently in direct address. A cook was addressed *cook* (occupational term), husband and wife addressed one another *husband* and *wife* (terms of relationship), and also men, women and gentlemen were addressed as such (generic terms) (Fernell 2001: 163).

But names could also be used to insult someone by addressing him with abusive adjectives and nouns (*thou damned tripe-visaged rascal, thou paper-faced villain, you blue-bottle rogue*) as will be discussed in chapter V. These mostly highly original forms are called NAME-CALLING and have also been investigated in Shakespeare plays (Jucker 2000: 97).

4.2. Address Pronouns – ‘You Can Say “You” to Me’

But let us first have a look how people address each other in friendly way. The study of this section is devoted to the development of address terms in the history of English. But before we go back some hundred years to look at the changing functions of address terms across time, we should first answer the question: What are address terms? Katie Wales defines them as follows (Wales 1989: 9):

Address terms: Forms used to refer to, or to name a person directly in speech or writing. They include titles (*your Ladyship*), kinship terms (*mother, mum*), endearments and insults (*darling, bitch*), as well as first names (*Margaret, Maggie*) surnames (*Thatcher*), titles and last names (*Mrs. Thatcher*).

Until today most European languages have at least two different pronouns of address:

- **Formal term:** The formal, polite term normally is made up by the 3rd respectively 2nd person plural form as the German *Sie* or the French *vous*. This polite pronoun address marks a kind of distance and respect towards the addressee. It is used by people who do not know each other well or want to mark distance or/and respect.
- **Informal term:** The closer term like the German *du* or the French *tu* is made up by the 2nd person singular. It is used for relatives, friends or people you feel acquainted with as well as among young people.

English, however, is not as complicated as German or French. Nevertheless, some Europeans – even high politicians – do not know how to handle the easy English address terms. According to an anecdote, the former German chancellor Helmut Kohl tried to get familiar with the Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher in saying: ‘You can say „you“ to me’, as mentioned in the introduction.

Address terms clearly vary in degree of formality. How somebody is addressed is dependent on the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, the attitude towards him and often also the situation in which the interchange takes place (e.g. private-public; formal-intimate) (Wales 1989: 9)

4.2.1. Old English – Two Kings and Two Address Pronouns

The English have not always used only one pronoun as address term. As most European languages English too once distinguished between one singular addressee

and a group of addressees. According to Brown and Gilman (in Jucker 2000: 92) the reason for the distinction between a *formal plural* address form and an *informal singular* address form is a political one: as there were two Roman emperors in the 4th century – one in Rome, one in Constantinople – ‘words addressed to one were, by implication, taken to be addressed to both’ (Jucker 2000). The plurality of kings required a plurality of address terms. These two terms then flourished in the medieval Europe that was characterised by a strictly hierarchical society. The social distinction could be expressed also by the use of different address terms.

In Old English the two address-terms were similar to the European system. It had the singular “*ðu*” and the plural “*ge*”.

4.2.2. Middle English – Plural *ye* Changed to Singular *ye*

The two terms became *thou* (singular) and *ye* (plural) in Middle English. In the 13th century the plural pronoun *ye* was used more and more in a singular context. But the choice seems to have been rather random. Nevertheless, Burnley made out a set of rules for the right choice of address terms (Jucker 2000: 93):

Singular addressees:

The formal and plural pronoun *ye* was used for singular addressees if they are either unfamiliar or if they are older and of higher status than the speaker. Address terms were also distinguished according to the social setting: courtly or non-courtly style.

Non-courtly style:

Informal *thou* (singular)

Courtly style:

- 1. intimate friends: informal *thou*
- 2. non-intimate friends: *ye*
- 2a. addressee is younger: *thou*
- 2b. addressee is older: formal *ye*

Therefore the address term a speaker used was depending on the social roles, the social status and the age of an addressee. ‘Thus *ye* can simply be described as a deference marker, where deference indicates respect and politeness’ (Jucker 2000: 94). This is also the reason why married couples at the court addressed each other with the formal and polite *ye*. It was not the degree of intimacy that influenced the choice on whether people should use the formal or the informal pronoun, but the deference.

4.2.3. *Modern English – ye Becomes you*

In Early Modern English *ye* was slowly replaced by *you*, the form for the accusative or dative case in Middle English. The use of plural *you* became very popular, whereas the use of *thou* started to have a negative connotation (used to and among the lowest rank of society). ‘To address somebody with *thou* was, therefore, an indication that the speaker judged the addressee to be socially inferior, which in itself can be understood as an insult’ (Jucker 2000: 94).

In Modern English, the term *thou* is restricted to religious contexts e.g. in a prayer God is called *thou* (see also next chapter). Now, only one address is used in English communication: Once a plural and formal (accusative) pronoun *you* now is the formal *and* informal address term. *You* did not only survive the changes of time, but it is also immune to social distinctions. *You* is used by everybody and addressed to everybody. It does not matter to which social class you belong to.

4.2.4. “A Sore Cut To Proud Flesh”¹

As we said above, *thou* became a religious pronoun. That is no accident - in fact did religion have a big influence on language, above all on address terms, as we will show in this chapter.

For England, the seventeenth century was a time of changes: political, religious and intellectual institutions were no longer unquestioned authorities and underwent serious transformations.

One of the sources of these struggles were the Protestants; they were no longer willing to accept the notion of Divine Truth that the Catholic Church claimed to be theirs to define; through Renaissance people had learned to trust their own personal experience – the ‘glory of personal belief’ (Silverstein 1985: 248) – rather than the word of the high authorities. The notion of the Divine Truth, or the truth itself became very problematic as the question arose how this truth could be represented – either through language or through other similar symbolic systems.

¹ Fox, G. in Silverstein, Michael. Language and the Culture of Gender: At the Intersection of Structure, Usage, and Ideology. P. 249.

So, as mentioned before, personal experiences became more important than ‘formal doctrines’ (Silverstein 1985: 247). Equalitarianism² and voluntarism³ (which were put to their limits by the so-called ‘extreme left’) had become important notions in this fight between the churches, the crown and the state, and language – the system of representational consciousness and interpersonal communication – played a very important role as it got caught in these struggles and transformations in several ways.

Also, England was trying to establish a national consciousness and was in need of a unifying language in order to represent the ‘distinctness of the English nation’ (Silverstein 1985: 247) and therefore people were in search of a true and plain English, through which the new found ideologies could be expressed in their most natural sense. The development of English as a unifying language went along with the opposition to the old languages (Latin and Greek) and the received traditions that had come along with these languages. People were opposed to these received and impelled traditions of language, education and religion et cetera. So standardising grammar, style and rhetoric became a problem for the English language as well as for Latin or Greek. This means that suddenly people had to learn how to write or spell correctly as the language became standardized. Before people had to deal with grammar and spelling only in Latin or Greek but now grammar became an issue in the English language as well.

People like the Baconians rejected Greek and Latin and supported the growth of English and the establishment of English as a plain language. The aim was to *return to the primitive purity and shortness* (Bishop Sprat 1667: 247) without any unnecessary features (Puritanism and the Plain Style of English). The Calvinists brought up a new ideology as their preachers claimed that the only truth is the one that God knows – which means that everyone is equal and the *only aristocracy was spiritual and beyond human criterion* (Haller 1938: 248). So according to them every man must be treated the same because only God is allowed to judge who is superior and who is not. Religious separatists – such as the Quakers (or Friends, as they were called at the time) – believed also that all individuals should be levelled before God; Plain English became their vehicle of expressing their Truth.

² *Equalitarianism*: the doctrine of the equality of mankind and the desirability of political and economic and social equality.

³ *Voluntarism*: Any theory which conceives will to be the dominant factor in experience or in the constitution of the world; -- contrasted with intellectualism. Schopenhauer and Fichte are typical exponents of the two types of metaphysical voluntarism, Schopenhauer teaching that the evolution of the universe is the activity of a blind and irrational will, Fichte holding that the intelligent activity of the ego is the fundamental fact of reality.

In front of this background it makes sense that the asymmetric distinction of T/V⁴ was the opposite of equalitarianism and *before God, all men are equal*. Consequently, the Quakers used exclusively *thou/thee* exclusively for addressing another person, regardless of the addressee's social status or the level of intimacy between speaker and addressee.

But the rest of the English society still used the asymmetric T/V distinction; thus, this distinction became a question of identity: Do I belong to the Quakers who defy worldly pride and ambition or do I belong to the rest of society? Do I 'thou' or do I 'you'? If people did not want to be mistaken for Quakers who did not use *you*, they had to use *you* exclusively; this is how the majority of English speakers abandoned the T/V distinction and the invariant use of *you* spread.

5. *Datheit*⁵ or in Modern Terms: 'Damn it'. Swearing and Insulting in the History of English

5.1. Insulting as Antithesis of Politeness

The several marks of politeness – such as terms of address and titles – also have their antithesis, that is: swearing and insulting. They are resultant of language adaptation to the relationship between speaker and addressee. When the evaluation of one another (reflected in the language use) reveals different points of view as to what is the position each of the participants occupies, than offence to the other may be caused. In order to clarify how it is that politeness and insulting are the result of the same phenomena – the evaluation and attitude towards the other in the context of communication – treated in opposite ways, we will use the following quotation: '[P]oliteness is the term we use to describe the extent to which actions, including the way things are said, match others perceptions of how they should be performed' (Grundy 1995: 129). We can infer by this that insults do not match with the others perceptions on how things should be said, whereas successful politeness strategies do.

If we assumed on the one hand the use of politeness in communication as resulting of an acknowledgement of a social order (as for example the use of the two pronouns *ye* and *thou* illustrates, or the use of the terms of address in general), we now focus on the study of swearing and insults as they break against the concern for the other's face in the situation of communication.

⁴ The plural address form is usually abbreviated as V on the basis of Latin *vos* and the singular address form as T on the basis of Latin *tu* (Jucker, 200: 92).

⁵ from Merovingian French: *Deu hat* = God's hate

5.2. Swearwords

As we know very well also English people swear too and they always have done it. From Old English until today the words used to swear or to insult have changed, but the purposes remained the same. It is hard to say, how old swearwords are in fact. Ashley Montagu (Montagu 1968: 5) puts it this way: It is as old as man and coeval with language. How old is man? Very near two million or more years. And what about speech? One may estimate that it began at about the same time. Interestingly enough many philologists have held that speech originated in utterances closely akin to swearing.

On the other hand, it is quite clear what purposes swearing serves: It gives expression to emotions and it therefore serves social and personal purposes.

Swearwords can be split up into different categories as the following examples show: Religious terms (e.g.: *God damn it, holy shit, Jesus Christ*), terms related to excrements or the organs that produce them (e.g.: *shit, crap, arsehole*); terms related to sex and genitals (e.g.: *cunt, puss* (for a coward), *dike*); and terms related to being unmanly and with unmanly behaviour (these terms are also often related with homosexuality, which was and is considered as unmanly by the society and especially men e.g.: *fag*)

Swearwords were influenced by the same circumstances and conditions as normal language was. Whenever new words were invented in the English language or a lot of words were loaned from another language, the same happened to the corpus of swearwords. An example of a very inventive period for swearwords was the time when Christianity was introduced in England. There were actually so many new inventions that Augustine, the one who had baptised Ethelbert of Kent⁶, felt the need to do something against that situation. Ashley Montagu describes this as follows: It was Ethelbert who, doubtless due to the influence of Augustine, about the year 600 reduced to writing the old customary laws of the Cantwara and so gave us the first

⁶ King of Kent; b. 552; d. 24 February, 616; son of Eormenric, through whom he was descended from Hengest. He succeeded his father, in 560, as King of Kent and made an unsuccessful attempt to win from Ceawlin of Wessex the overlordship of Britain. His political importance was doubtless advanced by his marriage with Bertha, daughter of Charibert, King of the Franks [...]. A noble disposition to fair dealing is argued by his giving her the old Roman church of St. Martin in his capital of Cantwaraburh (Canterbury) and affording her every opportunity for the exercise of her religion, although he himself had been reared, and remained, a worshipper of Odin. The same natural virtue, combined with a quaint spiritual caution and, on the other hand, a large instinct of hospitality, appears in his message to St. Augustine when, in 597, the Apostle of England landed on the Kentish coast.

formal record of the laws of an English people. In these laws codes and penalties relating to swearing are to be found; the penalties were comparatively light.

An example of borrowing new swearwords from another language is the time after the Norman Conquest. *Datheit*, which is used in the title, is the English version of *Deu hat*, meaning *damn it*, which is also the etymological descendant of *Datheit*.

Of course the corpus of swearwords does also change according to socially conditioned laws: Swearwords are created from concepts which are negative in society or have at least a negative connotation (think for example of racism). So new swearwords may be invented at every point in time.

5.3. Insulting

Insulting might be at least nearly as old as swearing. Maybe the first swearword was even used to insult someone. While swearing does, insulting does not need to consist of a swearword, because insulting depends more on the situation and maybe the subtlest form of it is the most insulting one.

There are various forms of insults; they vary in purpose or/and in degree of ritualised realisation. One form of insulting, which was highly ritualised and had the purpose of provoking aggressiveness, is called FLYTING. Jucker explains the terms as follows: The flyting consists of an exchange of verbal provocations between hostile speakers in a predictable and highly stylised way (Jucker 2000: 96). Typically the warriors would accuse each other of cowardice, failure of honour, irresponsible behaviour and crimes of kinship. The aim was either to make the opponent silent or to provoke a fight.

Another form, which is totally different from flyting, but also quite ritualised, is the one found in the Shakespearean insults. Shakespeare invented a lot of insults by being creative and compounding several words into insulting clauses: '*Thou paper-faced villain*' (Henry IV, Part 2, Act 5, Scene 4) is just one example.

There are also less ritualised ways of insulting like name calling (*you son of a bitch!*) or insults that do not contain any swearword (*you cry like a little girl*). The development of the ways of insulting, the degree of ritualised realisation and the purpose, went along with cultural and social development.

Consequently, we can say that all forms of insulting have in common that they aim to make the addressee lose his *face*: this is not so easy to prove with, say, Shakespearean insults since they are inserted in a fictional context; but in the case of flyting this is very apparent, as there is no other possibility for the addressee but to act either by taking the offence and losing his dignity, or by fighting to save his honour.

6. Conclusion

As could be seen, several strategies have been developed over the centuries. Politeness however has never been accidental but always conventional – it has always been a way of expressing relations and attitudes (communicative competence). Even swearing has been damn bloody hard to do in the f*** right way. Although nowadays we do not have the divisions into clergy, nobility et cetera anymore, politeness is still a very important factor in our daily lives and the way one has to address others is still determined conventionally, and something that must be learned.

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