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# A Study of Polite Speech in Eighteenth-Century Dramas

Hironobu KONISHI

## I

Eighteenth-century English Dramas depict the ideas and life-styles of the gentlemen and ladies in the fashionable world. The fashionable people went and saw all the regular dramas presented in Drury Lane and Covent Garden. They laughed and cried, and enjoyed and criticized the themes of dramas and the actors' performances there. The scenes of dramas (especially *Comdies of Manners* such as Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) and Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (1777)) surely associated the fashionable audience with their own daily behaviour.

Dramas with the domestic and private themes were very popular among the fashionable classes. "These dramatists made a direct and genuine attempt, though most often with a melodramatic emphasis, to represent some aspect in the lives of the middle classes who were constituting an ever increasing part of the audience".<sup>1</sup>

Among the brilliant dramatists, Sheridan gained great admiration for the skill with which he "combined the wit and elegance of a manners comedy, freed from all immodesty of the Restriction pattern".<sup>2</sup> He asserted that "The whole has elegance, and one is again reminded that while morals make men good, it is manners that make them interesting".<sup>3</sup>

The eighteenth-century was a phase of elegance and reason, which is reflected in the polite speech of the fashionable people. This thesis shows their polite speech through these eighteenth-century dramas: Goldsmith's *The Good Natur'd Man* (GM) (1768) and *She Stoops to Conquer* (SC), Sheridan's *The Rivals* (R) (1775) and *the School for Scandal* (SS), Hannah Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* (BS) (1780), George Colman's

*The Clandestine Marriage (CM)* (1766), Susannah Centlivre's *The Basset Table (BT)* (1705).<sup>4</sup> The dramatists probably made their characters talk as they would in real life, despite a little dramatization.

## II

The eighteenth-century was an era of order. "'Order' connoted unity, harmony, balance, correctness, rationality . . . and, consequently, beauty".<sup>5</sup> This order was supported by the campaign for better feelings or philanthropy and better taste, which were twin halves of the enlightened character. "Philanthropy" revealed true sympathy and "taste" true judgement. The concept of *taste* "embraced both collective and individual judgment and distinguished its possessor from the common herd".<sup>6</sup> Moreover, "Taste was not dilettantism in the pallid modern sense but the deep appreciation of artistic quality. The sense of many evaluative words was stronger then than now--politeness, elegance, refinement, delicacy and the like".<sup>7</sup> Susie I. Tucker, however, comments that the meaning of the term "'Polite' has changed from polished and elegant to merely mannerly"<sup>8</sup> by the late eighteenth century.

This century is also called a period of reason and elegance. These qualities were conventionally attributed to people of the ruling class. Their speech was something of a class-indicator. It was through adopting educated and polite speech that the middle classes attempted to raise themselves from their station, and that the upper classes guaranteed their position. The former classes included a newly monied class of merchants in London, who were distinguished primarily in terms of economic criteria and gained wealth, prestige, and had power. They needed a sign of their upward mobility, and "eagerly sought the refinements the grammarians had to offer as signs of their emergent status as educated persons".<sup>9</sup> If they were to be among the people of fashion, they had to speak like them. Charles Barber notes that "Money and dress were no longer enough to mark off the gentry from such social aspirants, so that language became increasingly important as a social marker".<sup>10</sup>

"[L]ater eighteenth-century rhetoricians and literary critics understandably attempt to explain and extend the special powers of words, the essential medium of civil and literary discourse".<sup>11</sup> James Harris (1709-1780) observed about the varieties of diction:

As every Sentiment must be exprest by Words; the Theory of Sentiment leads to that of Diction. Indeed the Connection between them is so intimate, that the same Sentiment, where the Diction differs, so as different in appearance, as the same person drest like a Peasant, or drest like a Gentleman....<sup>12</sup>

Diction is like a dress for ideas. Lord Chesterfield stressed the importance of an upper class bachelor's speech as well as his behaviour, through his letters to his son:

When you go into good company (by good company is meant the people of the first fashion of the place) observe carefully their turn, their manners, their address; and coform your own to them --September 5, 1748.<sup>13</sup>

Among the leading literary critics in the eighteenth-century, Jonathan Swift wrote on polite speech for the young upper classes:

The judicious reader will readily discover, that I make Miss Notable, my heroin; and Mr. Thomas Neverout, my hero. I have laboured both their characters with my utmost ability. It is into their mouthsthat I have put the liveliest questions, answers, repartees, and rejoinders; because, my design was to propose them bothas patterns for all young bachelors, and single ladies to copy after. By which, I hope very soon, to see polite conversation flourish between both sexes, in a more consummate degree of perfection than these kingdoms have yet ever known.<sup>14</sup>

Those writings were published to encourage all the young bachelors and single ladies to follow the decorums of the fashionable world. They were necessary because of the fact that the young people of fashion actually spoke badly and used vulgar language. James Burnett, Lord Monboddo (1714-1799) deplores changes in gentlemen's speech:

In my younger days, the people of fashion in England spoke with a certain gravity and dignity becoming their rank; and there was a remarkable difference in that respect betwixt the city and the court end of the town. Now, a young gentleman of the first rank talks or rather prates like a waiter in a city tavern, in such a glib, pert, flippant manner, as to me is very offensive, and indeed, sometimes not intelligible....<sup>15</sup>

This degradation of speech can be seen in *She stoops to Conquer*. The conspicuous character Tony Lumpkins, the squire, adjusts his speech to that of his rustic alehouse crews' in the country. He utters swear words a lot, uses double negatives like those in the statement "Ecod! I'll not be made a fool of no longer" (SC, 2), and prefers contractions such

as in "That's as I find' um" (SC, 2).

### III

We see polite speech in the eighteenth-century fashionable world. It is assumed that polite speech consists of polite language. That is, the polite speech is practically a vernacular of good conversation, more correct, more dignified or purple, and entirely, or almost entirely, free from slang.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the language of ordinary colloquial talk was full of expletives, easy idioms, and a varying amount of slang.<sup>17</sup>

*She stoops to Conquer* presents interesting scenes where Kate Hardcastle, the upper class gentry's daughter, in the first place, disguises herself as a bar-maid, and later restores herself to her social position. In the process, her language changes from being simple and unrefined into being polite and genteel. We see an interesting gap between Miss Hardcastle's speeches. She, imitating an uneducated bar-maid, says:

And who wants to be acquainted with you? I want no such acquaintance, not I. I'm sure you did not treat Miss Hardcastle that was here awhile ago in this obstropolous manner. I'll warrant me, before her you look'd dash'd, and kept bowing to the ground, and Talk'd, for all the world, as if you was before a justice of peace. (SC, 3)

This passage has one malapropism "obstropolous" meaning obstreperous, one old fashioned colloquialism "I'll warrant me", one rustic asseveration "I want no such acquaintance, not I.", and one solecism "as if you was". Those items were not part of sophisticated speech. Changing into her own natural manner, she says:

I believe these sufferings cannot be very great, Sir, which you can so easily remove. A day or two longer, perhaps, might lessen your uneasiness, by shewing the little value of what you now think proper to regret. (SC, 5.2)

Her speech is more elegant, delicate, and educated: the periphrastic phrase "I believe", the modal verb "might", the modal adverb "perhaps", the courtsey title "Sir", and the abstract noun "uneasiness". Noticing the changed style of her speech, Marlow whispers aside "This girl every moment improves upon me" (SC, 5.2).

Janet Holmes is of the opinion that "Being polite means

expressing respect towards the person you are talking to and avoiding offending them".<sup>18</sup> She illustrates "being polite" by saying that "Apologising for an intrusion, opening a door for another, inviting a new neighbour in for a cup of tea, using courtsey titles like *sir* and *madam*, and avoiding swear words in conversation with your grandmother could all be considered examples of polite behaviour".<sup>19</sup> The polite phenomenon is derived from the notion of "face". Erving Goffman and Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson describe politeness as showing concern for people's "face".<sup>20</sup> Almost every action (including utterance) works as a potential threat to someone's face. Holmes comments about people's polite speech:

Polite people avoid obvious face-threatening acts, such as insults and others; they generally attempt to reduce the threat of unavoidable face-threatening acts such as requests or warnings by softening them, or expressing them indirectly; and they use positively polite utterances such as greetings and compliments where possible".<sup>21</sup>

Participants adopt strategies of politeness in order to avoid or minimize face-threatening activities.

In the eighteenth century, polite people used the linguistic strategies associated with politeness. We see them through polite speech in dramas.

One type of politeness strategy can be seen in various modes of address used. Polite people called each other with their titles such as "my Lady" and "your Lordship". These titles were courtly-genteel jargon, that is, "terms from the specialized vocabulary of the courtier, to create verbal elegance independent of the court or of any specific noble or royal person".<sup>22</sup> These modes of address were more essential and a matter of pride. According to Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness, the "weightiness" of a face-threatening action is computed by adding the "distance" in status between speaker and hearer, the "power" differential between them, and the "risk" posed by the action.<sup>23</sup> "The greater the discrepancies between speaker's and hearer's status and power, the more politeness is needed".<sup>24</sup> If the courtly-genteel language demands an unusually high "distance" and "power", that means that it is unusually polite.

Lord Worthy: [to Buckle] So, have you seen my Lady Reveller?

Alpiew: My Lord--

Lord Worthy: Ha! Mrs Alpiew.

Buckle: Here's your Lordship's letter. (BT, 2.1)

Hardcastle: Mr. Marlow--Mr. Hastings--gentlemen (SC, 2)

Greetings are another social convention in which politeness used, and the factors of "distance" and "power" must be taken into account. In greeting, polite people adjusted their greetings properly according to their addressees' social rank: they greeted their superiors or equals with the accepted form "your humble servant".

In *Rivals* (2.1), Acres greets Captain Absolute, his servant Fag, and a gentleman Faulkland. He used modes of address properly according to his addressees' social rank.

Acres: Hah! my dear friend, noble captain, and honest Jack, how do'st thou? just arrived faith, as you see.--  
Sir, your humble servant.

Moreover, polite people exchanged formal gestures as well as formal greetings. In *The The Clandestine Marriage* (3.1) Sir John Melvil greets Mrs. Heidel with "Your most obedient humble servant, madam!", bowing very respectfully. And Mrs. Heidel greets him with "Your servant, Sir John!", dropping a half-curtsy.

When making a request, the speaker must be especially aware of the rules of politeness, because the factor of "risk" as well as "distance" and "power", comes into play. In requesting, the speaker is very careful not to impose the addressee whom he directs to do something, and he uses linguistic devices which attenuate or reduce the strength of the utterance and damp down its force or intensity or directness. These are devices of negative politeness. Negative politeness masks status difference through means "such as avoiding overt coercion, not making assumptions, being direct about one's intentions and so on".<sup>25</sup>

The auxiliary verb "may" with the first-person pronoun "I" sounds "the speaker verbally puts himself in the position where he needs to ask permission",<sup>26</sup> and he acts as if he were an inferior or a servant.

Tony: Pray, gentlemen, may I be so bold as to ask the place from whence you came? (SC, 1.2)

Honeywood: May I beg leave to ask your name?

Bailiff: Yes, you may. (GM, 3)

There is another form to get permission:

Hastings: Dear Madam, permit me to lecture the young gentleman a little. (SC, 2)

By couching a request in polite language, the speaker reduces the risk the request poses to the addressee.

The auxiliary verbs "will" or "would" meaning volition and "can" or "could" meaning ability paired with the second-person pronoun "you" are used in the interrogative form as requests. The subjunctive forms "would" and "could" sound more polite. These questions are hearer-oriented; that is, they give the hearer the option of accepting or rejecting the speaker's offer. These phrases seem to be derived from the spirit of the English expression "putting oneself into the other's shoes".

Bailliff: Would you have me perjure myself? (GM, 3)  
Sir Oliver: Sure you wouldn't sell your Forefathers--  
would you? (SS, 3.3)

On the other hand, the auxiliary verb "must" functions as a device of positive politeness. For example, when Courtall entertains his guests, positive politeness reinforces solidarity through gestures "such as claiming common ground or fulfilling the hearer's wants".<sup>27</sup>

Courtall: Gentlemen, you must excuse me now. Come and drink chocolate at twelve. (BS, 4.2)

The auxiliary verb "must" shows the host laying an obligation upon his guest. It is polite for him to insist upon his guest accepting his hospitality so that the guest does not feel that he is posing a risk to the host. Thus when making a polite request, it is natural for a speaker to use formal language.

Holmes notes that "being polite" most obviously involves some accepted devices of non-imposing negative politeness.<sup>28</sup> There are hedges which attenuate or reduce the strength of the utterance and damp down its force or intensity or directness for the devices.<sup>29</sup>

Hastings: Your niece, is she? And that young gentleman, a brother of yours, I should presume? (SC, 2)

By "hedging" his assumptions with the tag questions "is she?" and "I should presume?", Hastings is reducing the "face threat" to his addressees, sounding like his assumptions prove incorrect. We have examples of pragmatic particles which reduce the "face threat": "in my opinion", "I am



afraid" and "perhaps".

Maria: But, in my opinion, those who report such things  
are equally culpable. (SC, 1.1)  
Joseph: I am afraid his circumstances are very bad  
indeed, ma'am. (SC, 1.1)  
Sir William: He might have reason, perhaps. (GM, 3)

Holmes notes "Compliments are clearly positive politeness devices which express goodwill and soildarity between the speaker and the addressee".<sup>30</sup> Carey McIntosh notes "the compliments that play such a key role in courtly-genteel exchanges may be understood as ways of attending to the addressee's wants".<sup>31</sup>

Joseph: Ah! Mrs. Candour--if everybody has your Forbear-  
ance and Good nature! (SS, 1.1)

Compliments tend to be showy, which sounds negative.

Mrs. Rackett: How so, pray? Good morning t'ye both. Here,  
here's a hand a piece for you. [They kiss her hands.]  
Flutter: How so: because it has given you so many beauties.  
Mrs. Rack.: Delightful compliment! what do you think of  
that, Villers?  
Villers: That he and his compliments are alike--showy.  
(BS, 1.3)

Euphemisms are a negative politeness device. When we use euphemistic expressions, we use an accepted word or phrase instead of one likely to cause offence. Mrs. Candour entertains her circle of scandals by letting them know others' affairs.

Mrs. Candour:--to Day Mrs. Clackit assur'd me Mr. and Mrs. Honeymoon--were at last become mere man and wife like the rest of their acquaintances--she likewise hinted that a certain widow in the next street had got rid of her Dropsy and recover'd her shape in a most surprising manner--and at the same time Miss Tattle who was bye affirm'd that Lord Buffalo had discover'd his Lady at a house of no extraordinary Fame-- (SS, 1.1)

Here the euphemistic phrase "got rid of her Dropsy" means had an abortion and "a house of no extraordinary Fame", a brothel. These euphemisms are not kind but sarcastic and insulting. Ephemistic expressions used for offending others shows that the fashionable circle had a hypocritical sense of politeness.

Thus, we see polite speech in eighteenth-century English dramas. Polite speech was something of a class indicator which distinguished the fashionable people from the common people in the eighteenth century. If people were to belong to the fashionable society, they had to learn to speak in elegant and genteel language. Politeness was a strategy of securing their social position for people of fashion.

Notes

1. B. Ifor Evans, *A Short History of English Drama* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1948) 129.
2. Evans 139.
3. Evans 140.
4. The editions of these dramas used in this paper are follows: *The Good Natur'd Man* and *She Stoops to Conquer* are to *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith V*, ed. Arthur Friedman (Oxford: The Clarendon Prs., 1966); *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal*, to *Sheridan's Plays*, ed. Cecil Price (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Prs., 1975); *The Belle's Stratagem*, to *The "Other" Eighteenth Century: English Women of Letters 1660-1800*, ed. Robert W. Uphaus and Gretchen M. Foster (East Lansing: Colleagues Prs., 1991); *The Clandestine Marriage*, to *Eighteenth Century Plays*, ed. John Hampden (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1928); *The Basset Table*, to *Female Playwrights of the Restoration* ed. Paddy Lyons & Fidelis Morgan (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1991).
5. Arthur Humphreys, "The Arts in Eighteenth-Century Britain". *The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain*, ed. Boris Ford (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1991) 7.
6. Humphreys 16.
7. Humphreys 15.
8. Susie I. Tucker, *Protean Shape* (London: The Athlone Prs., 1967) 110.
9. Suzanne Romaine, introd., *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, vol. 4 1776-1997, ed. Suzanne Romaine (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1998) 19.
10. Charles Barber, *The English Language: A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1993) 206-07.
11. H. Lewis Ulman, "Thought and Language in George Campbell's Philosophy of Rhetoric". *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment*, ed. Jennifer J. Carter and Joan H. Pittock (Aberdeen: Aberdeen Univ. Prs., 1987) 271.
12. Susie I. Tucker, *English Examined* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1961) 83-84.
13. P. D. Stanhope, *Lord Chesterfield's Letters*. ed. D. Roberts (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Prs., 1992) 89.
14. Jonathan Swift, "A Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation, According to the Most Polite Mode and Method, now used at Court, and in the best Companies of England", *Jonathan Swift*, ed. D. Woolley (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Prs., 1984) 576-77.
15. Tucker, *English Examined* 121-122.
16. Logan Pearsall Smith, *Words and Idioms* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1925) 149.
17. Smith 149.
18. Janet Holmes, *Women, Men and Politeness* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1995) 4.
19. Holmes 5.
20. The concept of "face" is discussed in Erving Goffman's *Interaction Ritual* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967) and Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1987).
21. Holmes 5.
22. Carey McIntosh, *The Evolution of English Prose, 1700-1800, Style, Politeness, and Print Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1998) 69.
23. Brown and Levinson 76-78.
24. McIntosh 219.
25. William Downes, *Language and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1984) 293.
26. F. R. Palmer, *Modality and the English Modals*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1990) 193.
27. Downes 293.
28. Holmes 75.
29. Holmes 74.
30. Holmes 118.
31. McIntosh 219.