

Exploring Diachronic Variation in Discernment Politeness in Ancient Egyptian

Abstract

In this paper we investigate evidence of diachronic variation in patterns of Discernment Politeness in letters written in the ancient Egyptian Old Kingdom (c. 2300–2200 BCE) and Late Ramesside period (c. 1099–1069 BCE). We present examples of requests, information acts, and honorifics used in these letters, predominantly those letters sent by subordinates to their superiors, to explore how this relationship dynamic is linguistically indexed. Our evidence shows that throughout the Old and New Kingdoms, communicative acts were regulated by behavioural norms dependent on power structures rather than individual volition, with Power being the most dominant social variable. Finally, we argue that Discernment is a key approach for exploring politeness in texts from ancient Egypt, supporting current research on the topic, and that the approach used here for the ancient Egyptian material has wider applicability for diachronic linguistic analyses of remote civilizations with a high level of hierarchy.

Keywords:

Discernment; Ancient Egypt; letters; power; requests; honorifics; information acts

1. Introduction

Discernment Politeness, as a politeness approach, is an effective tool for exploring linguistic patterns in language used by subordinates when communicating with superior individuals (Ridealgh and Jucker 2019: 65). For this paper, our definition of Discernment is the “quasi-mandatory selection of the appropriate linguistic item based on the social context of the interaction” utilised by (Low-power) subordinates when communicating with their (High-power) superiors (Ridealgh and Jucker 2019: 57). As Ridealgh and Jucker state (2019: 64), “what we see in remote cultures is that interlocutors recognised the fixed power hierarchy [and t]hey established their own conventions and behavioural norms within the context of that specific relationship dynamic”. Hence, “in highly hierarchical societies, within interactions where Discernment takes place, the linguistic behaviour that indexes the social status of the hearer is prioritised over individual facework” (Ridealgh and Unceta Gómez 2020: 234). This means that in specific interactions between High-powered and Low-powered individuals, the Low-powered individual must utilise culturally determined (and expected) linguistic utterances when interacting with High-powered superiors, rather than other linguistic strategies with more volition as associated with Facework.

In this contribution, we will focus on exploring the patterns in language use within the subordinate/superior relationship dynamic and the linguistics forms subordinates had to utilise when interacting with identifiable superior individuals within data from ancient Egypt. We are particularly interested in assessing the extent to which any identified utterances changed or were further developed over time. To assess this, we will focus on letter corpora from two distinct periods in ancient Egypt: the Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2160 BCE) and the late New Kingdom (c. 1550–1069 BCE). Ancient Egyptian provides an interesting case study for exploring diachronic changes in interactional behaviour due to the continued use of the language over a significant period of time. It first appeared in writing shortly before 3000 BCE and then remained active until the eleventh century CE (Allen 2014: 1). During its period of use, Ancient Egyptian went through five evolutionary stages: Old Egyptian, Middle Egyptian, Late Egyptian, Demotic and Coptic. The first two stages are grouped together as “Earlier Egyptian”, and the remaining phases are commonly known as “Later Egyptian” (Loprieno 1995: 5-7). Although no clear evidence of pre-Coptic regional dialects exists in texts, the

shifting of the country's political capital from north to south in the Old and Middle Kingdom respectively, and then again to the north in the New Kingdom, supports the common Egyptological belief that Old and Late Egyptian derive from a northern dialect, while Middle Egyptian was originally a southern dialect (Loprieno 1995: 8). Diachronic differences are visible across all linguistic domains but are more pronounced between Earlier and Later Egyptian than between each stage. Texts written from Old to Late Egyptian use hieroglyphic and hieratic scripts, while Demotic and Coptic have their specific homonym writing systems.

During pharaonic history, society remained firmly hierarchical, with limited literacy. However, the relationships between state and individual had been constantly re-negotiated in state-provincial power struggles. In the two time periods under study here, we encounter a deeply pharaoh-centric Old Kingdom that ruled over an anonymous non-royal collective, and a more socially heterogeneous New Kingdom with wider individual participation in the religious, artistic, and economic spheres of the country.

To analyse the temporal impact on Discernment Politeness, a comparison will be undertaken between the late Old Kingdom personal letters (c. 2300–2200 BCE) from Saqqara, Elephantine and Balat, and the New Kingdom Late Ramesside Letters (c. 1099–1069 BCE) from Thebes. The Old Kingdom corpus is made up of personal letters mostly written on papyrus and sent between acquainted individuals concerning farming issues, household matters, and the state administration. Hierarchy in the Old Kingdom missives is easily discernible from the use of respectful circumlocutions to replace second person pronouns. Similarly, the New Kingdom corpus details the daily lives of a community situated around Medinat Habu on the Theban West Bank (modern day Luxor) during the reign of Ramesses XI, the last king of the New Kingdom. The letters follow strict patterns in communication, both in terms of grammatical forms utilised (Sweeney 2001: 53), use of directives and information acts, and length of the formal introductions (Ridealgh 2013), which change according to the relationship the sender of the letter has with the recipient. Senders of letters who are superior to the recipient tend to use a reduced formal introduction and a higher frequency of directives, whilst subordinate letter senders utilise longer formal introductions and more indirect or elaborated request acts (Ridealgh 2013; Ridealgh and Jucker 2019: 59).

2. Discernment Politeness: a theoretical overview

Since the 1980s and the pivotal work conducted on Japanese honorifics (Hill et al., 1986; Ide, 1989, 1992), academic scholarship on Discernment Politeness has become more apparent within Politeness Research (Pizziconi 2003; Kádár and Mills 2013; Kadar and Paternoster 2015; Ridealgh 2016; Ridealgh and Jucker 2019; Ridealgh and Unceta Gómez 2020). As Ridealgh and Jucker (2019: 57) state:

The term “Discernment” was initially suggested by Hill et al. (1986) and further expanded upon by Ide (1989) in their respective analyses of Japanese honorifics”. The choice of a specific honorific, they argued, is not based on a strategic intention by the speaker, but a quasi-mandatory selection of the appropriate linguistic item based on the social context of the interaction. For such quasi-mandatory linguistic behaviour, they propose the Japanese term “wakimae”, which stands for “the practice of polite behavior according to social conventions” (Ide, 1989: 230). As a near-enough English translation for this Japanese term Hill et al. (1986: 348) and Ide (1989: 230) suggest the term “Discernment”.

Ide (1989: 231) is very clear in her understanding of “Discernment” within the Japanese context, describing it as “oriented mainly toward the wants to acknowledge the ascribed positions or roles of the participants as well as to accommodate to the prescribed norms of

the formality of particular settings [where t]he Speaker regulates his or her choice of linguistic forms so as to show his or her sense of place". This is in direct contrast to the framework of Facework proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) in which honorifics are determined to be strategically selected to appease the facewants of the addressee. Rather under "Discernment", the Power status of the addressee overrides any facewants, and in this case, honorifics are used as acknowledgements of the status difference between the speaker and the addressee — they are not strategically selected (Ridealgh and Jucker 2019: 57).

Since this important work in the 1980s, Discernment Politeness has developed into a solid Second Order concept within Politeness Research, moving away from its focus on the Japanese concept of "wakimae", now seen as the localised version of Discernment Politeness in Japan (i.e., Matsumoto, 1988, 1989, 1993). Ridealgh and Jucker (2019: 59) summarise this in the following way:

Such a conceptualisation of Discernment leaves it open to an empirical investigation concerning whether Discernment was a particularly important form of politeness in any given cultural context or whether it existed at all, even though we suspect that all cultures will have at least some forms of behaviour that in a quasi-mandatory way reflect social relations between speaker and addressee. It also leaves it open as to whether a given speech community has developed a meta-awareness of this specific aspect of their culture, and, as a consequence, developed a specific vocabulary (i.e., first-order labels) in order to talk about such behaviour.

Today, Discernment Politeness encompasses a much broader view of the indexing of language utilised by Low-power individuals with High-power interactants, evaluated and considered on an individual cultural level (Pizziconi 2003; Kádár and Mills 2013; Kadar and Paternoster 2015; Ridealgh and Jucker 2019; Ridealgh and Unceta Gómez 2020: 235). Hierarchy and (social) Power play an overarching role within the subordinate/super dynamic, restricting and framing the interaction in a culturally specific manner (Ridealgh and Unceta Gómez 2020: 235), allowing for academic investigation of this phenomenon within written textual data. Discernment Politeness is particularly compatible with the ancient Egyptian context and the indexing of hierarchy is clearly visible in personal letters, influencing the format of the letters themselves, grammar and word choice (Sweeney 2001: 53; Ridealgh 2016; Almansa-Villatoro 2020). A good example of this in the letters are the formal introductions¹, which contain the greetings and blessings to the recipient. Senders of letters who are superior to the recipient tend to use a reduced formal introduction, or none at all when the power imbalance is particularly weighted, whilst subordinate letter senders utilise longer formal introductions to display respect (Ridealgh 2013). Additionally, in the Old Kingdom correspondence, first and second person pronouns were consistently replaced by other nouns in letters sent to equals or superiors (see section 3.3 in this article). As Ridealgh and Jucker (2019: 59) state, "this adherence to social hierarchy allows us to establish a pattern of linguistic expectations within this form of communication and demonstrates the fixed nature of the *social power variable*".

3. Diachronic variation in Discernment Politeness

To look at the impact of time on discernment politeness, this section will explore key interpersonal elements of the letters, namely request acts, information acts and honorifics.

3.1. Request acts

¹ Although the formal introductions of letters from the Old Kingdom tend to be poorly preserved.

The majority of the Old Kingdom letters contain request acts. However, typically these directives are never explicitly stated in the letters. Rather, subordinates imply their requests to superiors, who use contextual cues to interpret what is being asked of them. The short Balat dispatches are an exception to this rule as they end with the clear expression of a request. Outside of the Balat dispatches only one letter, Turin 54002 (Roccati 1968), from the Old Kingdom corpus is sent from an identifiable superior to subordinate. This document is lacunose, and, as such, explicit requests might have been originally present but are now lost. Examples (1-5) come from egalitarian (Berlin 8869) and low-to-high letters and showcase the cooperative nature of Old Kingdom communication.

(1) *n mrw.t nfr n jr sn=k jm ht nb msd.t zh³.k*

For the sake that your brother there (=I) has never done anything that your scribe (=you) would hate. (Berlin 8869, 3-4; Smither 1942)²

(2) *jw b³k.t tn n.t mrry jb=s ^cnh r=f m³z=s wpt n nb=s*

This maidservant of Merry (= I), her (= my) heart is alive when she (= I) sees the messenger of her lord (= You). (P. Boulaq 8, 5; Baer 1966; Goedicke 1988)

As Example (1) shows, the senders strove to demonstrate common values with the addressee in order to emphasize community belonging. Similarly, the letter writers highlight connections, especially those of kinship, in an attempt to make the addressee feel appreciated. Example (2) from P. Boulaq 8 also supports this point. In Example (3) Nebet is the one chosen to express the indirect request (although she is not the letter's first writer) because she has recently married into the addressee's extended family (Almansa-Villatoro 2020). The assumption that the sender and addressee share beliefs and wants, and the desire to show the addressee that their needs are met are the basic premises of positive politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987: 121-129), an interactional behaviour typical of intimate, community-centered societies (Tsuzuki et al. 2005; Abuarrah et al. 2013: 1121-1122). The specific request that the addressee intervene to secure a position for a relative of the first sender is expressed indirectly by Nebet towards the end of the letter (see Example (3)), immediately followed by the first sender's subtleness in urging the addressee to comply (see Example (4)):

(3) *dd.n(=j) mdt=f n wp.t n hm=k r rdj.t=f m zh³ n z³ n nfr-z³-hr mr.t-pr jw=f dry jm n šwt tz n wp.t n hm=k jm*

I have told his speech to the messenger of your retainer (=your messenger) about placing him as scribe of the *phyle* of the pyramid chapel of Nefersahor. He is still removed from there because of a lack of delivery of the messenger of your retainer (=your messenger). (P. Boulaq 8, 8-10; Baer 1966; Goedicke 1988)

(4) *jn r rdj mrrj nb=j ndm r=f nbt b³k.t n.t pr-d.t m sdm mdw r b³k pn snnw*

How about Merry, my lord, allowing the pleasing on his part of Nebet, the maidservant of the funerary estate, by means of hearing the speech concerning this fellow servant (=him)? (P. Boulaq 8, 10-12; Baer 1966; Goedicke 1988)

Hints at requests, namely indirect petitions, are more recurrent among people living in close communities. Well-acquainted collectives rely on shared knowledge, enhancing the group-solidarity through implicature (Ervin-Tripp 1976: 42-45; Ogiermann 2015: 35), which could be a fruitful strategy to obtain the addressee's sympathy and cooperation. Although it is necessary to consider that the function of indirectness varies across cultures (Blum-Kulka 1987; Ogiermann 2009; Grainger and Mills 2016), the Old Kingdom examples seem to suggest

² All translations are the authors' own, as are any mistakes.

that requesting off-record was the norm in communications with superiors and equals. Farther from creating “deferential” negative politeness distance between interlocutors, the indirectness of Old Kingdom communication rather highlights their proximity. Because it is used as a strategy to address superiors, this behaviour illustrates the variability of “deference” across cultures: in the Old Kingdom emphasizing proximity was a deferential act. In Example (5), an overseer of the troops tries to convince his superior, the vizier, to send the army’s clothing directly to Tura by explaining how time-consuming it would be having the entire troop moved to the capital. While contesting his superior’s order, the letter’s author indirectly proposes that the clothing load move to Tura by arguing that it would only take one day to reach the troop there:

(5) *sk (j)r(j)-md³.t m jw.t r r-³w hn^c wsh.t sk b³k jm jt=f hrw 6 m hnw hn^c t³z tn nj hbs.t=s snk n.t
k³.t pw m-^c b³k jm sk hrw js-pw w^c hb.t=f n t³z tn hbs.t=s*

While the messenger (=you) is coming to Tura with a barge, the servant there (=I) will take six days in the Residence with this troop before it is dressed. It is something that would damage the work of the servant there (=my work), while its subtraction would be just one day for this troop so that it is dressed. (Cairo JE 49623, 4-7; Gunn 1925)

The Balat dispatches provide an opportunity to compare hierarchically indexed politeness in on-record requests. However, their short telegram-like layout and depersonalization of both sender and addressee (Pantalacci 1998: 306, n. c) rid their language of the needs of face-saving strategies. Messages addressing administrative and governmental necessities could not afford hint-guessing times for requests that were, nevertheless, protected with the guise of work needs. A linguistic standardization of hierarchical behaviour is thus visible and easily comparable among the Balat letters, but we should be wary of extrapolating this data to the analysis of personal correspondence because it has been shown that off-record requests were the norm in private interaction.

(6) *w^d k³ n (j)r(j)-md³.t m^{3c} jqd.w*

May the *Ka* of the messenger (= your *Ka*) command that the craftsmen be sent. (Balat 3686, 3-4; Pantalacci 1998)

(7) *jr n=k jp nn n (j)m(j)-r pr rnsj*

Do, yourself, the counting of these to the overseer of the palace Rensi. (Balat 4965, 4-5; Pantalacci 1998)

Both sender and addressee are anonymous in Example (6), but the sender’s use of honorifics (see Section 3.3) reveals that the addressee is in a position of superiority. Therefore, the request in Example (6) is redressed through the mediation of the *Ka* (the spiritual vital force of any individual) and the use of a subjunctive *sdm=f* (Allen 2014: §18.8), which makes the request appear as a softer plead for cooperation, rather than a directive. Conversely, Rensi, the sender of Balat 4965 (Example (7)), is a royal noble (*šps nsw.t*) and reporter (*w^hmw*), a High-power individual who worked closely with the Governor in the oases’ administration (Pantalacci 2013: 200). Rensi’s request appears as a command with the use of an imperative form. Across the Old Kingdom corpus, there is only one more instance of an imperative form, and it appears in P. Turin 54002. Indeed, P. Turin 54002 is the only high-to-low letter that has been preserved from the Old Kingdom, and among other threatening utterances, its sender urges the addressee to watch himself of the law officials (*z³w t^w n srj.w*).

By the New Kingdom, the indirectness of request acts had disappeared within the Late Ramesside Letters; subordinates writing to superiors could utilise directives, albeit with mitigation and frugality. Example (8) contains a request for help from the workmen of the

Necropolis in ancient Thebes (modern day Luxor) made to their superior, the General Piankh — Piankh is the highest ranked individual in the Late Ramesside Letters. This type of request act is noticeably different from the directives issued by superiors. In High-power letters, directives generally consist of the imperative plus action and are only a few lexemes long. Additionally, superiors could certainly use a higher frequency of directives within letters, as seen in Example (9), a letter sent by the General Piankh to a subordinate. Interestingly both High- and Low-power individuals utilise the conjunctive *mtw=k (sdm=f)* to initiate directives, as the function of this conjunctive is as a continuing form, a morphologically formalised type of coordination (Shisha-Halevy 1995: 300), and importantly is not linked with power in anyway (Ridealgh 2014: 39). It is the mitigation around the conjunctive to limit the imposition of the directive that power impacts.

(8) *hr ptr h3b=k r-dd wn w^c s.t m n3 s.t h3.wty mtw=tn s3w t3y=st ht j.jrj.t<=j> jy j.n=f p3y=n nb tw=n jry shn.w j.jrj=n dj.t gmj=k sw w3h grg.tw p3 nty tw=n rh sw mtw=k wdj s3 T3ry n pr hr r rdj.t jwj=f ptr=f n=n w^c hy y3 tw=n dj.t smj jw=n htht jw bw rh=sn s.t rd.wj=n*

Now, see, you have sent word, saying, ‘Open a place (tomb?) in the place of the ancestors, and you shall guard its seal until I have returned’ so he said, our lord. We will carry out the commissions. We shall enable you to discover it [intact and prepared] in the place, which we know. And you should send the Scribe of the Necropolis Tjaroy; let him come so that he may look as an inspector for us. Oh, we tried to go but we turned back as we did not know the place to put our feet. (P. BM EA 10375, v.9-13; Cerný 1939: 47; Wentz 1967: 61; 1990: 195)

(9) *mtw=k jrj=w m-dj gmj=j n=k bt3.w*

And you shall do them, do not let me discover any wrongdoing on your part. (P. BN 197 III, v. 2; Černý 1939: 34; Wentz 1967: 52; 1990: 184; Černý, Groll & Eyre 1978: 123, ex. 434; Sweeney 2001: 167).

3.2 Information Acts

We define as “information acts” the communications that do not seek to trigger an immediate response from the addressee but are rather concerned with sharing details of the author’s own actions. This means we are often viewing combined locutionary and illocutionary acts. Two Old Kingdom letters from Elephantine addressed to a father include information acts to reassure the latter that commands will be fulfilled. The beginning of lacunose documents, such as P. Boulaq 8, have been reconstructed as containing mentions and quotations of previous correspondence (Goedicke 1988, 140). However, the existence of such quotations is highly hypothetical, as their actual Old Kingdom attestations are rare. In Example (10) a son confirms that he will proceed as his father has ordered, changing a behaviour that has caused his disapproval. In Example (11) a daughter paraphrases the complaints of a certain Ikem and assures her father that she is writing a letter to the former.

(10) *[...] [jnt.]n=f r bw nt(j) z3=k jm jm hr sdm n m[dw] [...] jw z3=k jm r jr.t wd.t.n nb.t [...] jr grt z.t h3bt.n r-md3t hr=s n z3=k jm [r] hrw.jn js smr w^c.t(j) (j)m(j)-r pr jqw jnt=f smn s sdm z3=k jm hr h3b.t n.t z3=k jm*

[...the letter (?)], which he brought to the place where your son (=I) is, to listen to the words [...]. Your son will do everything that has been commanded [to him]. Moreover, regarding the woman about whom the messenger (=You) has sent to your son there (=Me) about the complaint “it is the companion of the Sole One, the overseer of the house of Intef son of Iku who has caused her to be established”, your son there (=I) will obey what has been sent to your son there (=me). (Strasbourg A, 2-4; Edel 1992)

(11) *jr hm nn dd.n jk[m r z3t=k]k jm n dd jw js nfr n dd z3t=k jm jn.t n jkm jn z3t=k jm dj=s jn.t md3.t n jkm*

As for this which Ikem said regarding your daughter there saying that your daughter there has not let anything be brought to Ikem, it is your daughter who will have a letter brought to Ikem. (P. Elephantine, 8-10; Fischer-Elfert 2018)

Remarkably, all our known examples of royal correspondence in the Old Kingdom begin by referencing a letter that the addressee has previously sent to the king. Unsurprisingly, the king does not promise compliance, nor does he respond to any information requested by the addressee. Rather, it was the officials who presumably informed the king of a well conducted service in a previous letter. The king, thus, references the addressee's letter to emphasize the latter's loyalty to the state (see Example (12)).

(12) *jw m3.n hm(=j) zh3 pn nfr.wj rdj.n=k jn.t=f m stp-z3 m hrw pn nfr n sndm jb n jzzj m3c.wj m mrrt=f m3c.wj mry hm(=j) m33 zh3=k pn r h.t nb rh tw tr dd mrrt hm(=j) r h.t nb.t*

My incarnation has seen this very wonderful letter which you have made be brought to the audience hall in this great day of consulting with Izezi with what he truly loves. What my incarnation loves is to see this your letter more than anything else, and you are aware indeed of how to say what my incarnation loves more than anything else (Letter from king Izezi to Shepsesra, 2-3; Quibell 1909: 24; Urk. I 179.12-180.10; Eichler 1991: 149-152)

Within the Late Ramesside Letters, subordinates are also more likely to use information acts to confirm completion of directives made to them by superiors, such as Example (13) taken from a letter sent by Butehamun to his father Dhutmose — here the generational divide necessitates a superior/subordinate relationship between the father and son. In this example, the repetition of the original directive is utilised to confirm both its receipt and that the directive has been understood, before informing the recipient of the consequential action. The purpose of such communicative acts is to demonstrate the adherence to the relational norm and expectation that subordinates must complete all directives issued in order to maintain a successful relationship with their superiors. Example (14) is slightly different in that the information act is included in a letter sent by the General Piankh to acknowledge and critique (albeit positively) the actions of a subordinate.

(13) *jr p3 h3b j.jri=k r-dd m-jri nnj mdw nb jnk shn.w nb ntj m sh.t n3 jt r sk3 [r] [bdg3b] [bn3b] w3d m-mj.tt jn=k di=j [...] n3 w3d st dg3 n3 jt bw jri=j rwi rd.wj jm*

As to the sending you made, saying “Do not neglect any commission of mine, which is in the fields, specifically to plough the grain and (to see) to the planting for me of the vegetables as well,” so you said. I caused [...]. The vegetables are planted and (as for the) grain, I do not move my feet from there. (P. Geneva D 407, *rt.*9-12; Wente, 1967: 33-34; 1990: 187-188)

(14) *p3 h3b j.jrj=k r-dd jry=j r3r wpw.t nb.t shn.w nb n p3y<=j> nb nty r-jwd=j bn tw=j nny j.n=k sw m-s3 p3 j.jrj=k j.jrj=k m-mj.tt m-dwn zp-2*

As for you having sent word saying, “I have carried out every task and all the commissions of my lord, which are my responsibility: I am not idle”, so you said. It is all right, what you have done. You should henceforth act the same way! (P. BN 197 III, *rt.*4-5; Černý 1939: 34; Wente 1967: 52; 1990: 184; Černý, Groll & Eyre 1978: 123, ex. 434; Sweeney 2001: 167).

For the most part, in both letter corpora, informative acts seem to be part of letter etiquette to ensure that letters arrived or were read in sequence, an interpersonal strategy used more by Low-power individuals. This is likely a result of the infrastructure in place at the time to deliver letters (sometimes state supported but often couriers were

used) which seems to not always have been reliable(!) and societal expectations that directives issued by superiors needs to be completed promptly for subordinates to maintain positive relationships with their superiors.

3.3. Honorifics

The Old Kingdom correspondence is rich in honorifics, which are used to replace personal pronouns. First and second person replacement occurs exclusively in letters sent to an equal (see Example (1)) or a superior (see Examples (2)-(6), (10)-(11)). First person pronouns are replaced with Low-power honorifics (e.g. *b3k jm* “the servant there”, *z3.k jm* “your son there”) while High-power honorifics (e.g. *zh3=k* “your scribe”, *nb=j* “my lord”) replace second person pronouns (Brown and Gilman 1960). When a superior addresses a subordinate, second person personal pronouns are used instead of honorifics. The king is the only sender to use first person replacement when addressing inferiors in letters, as he almost invariably refers to himself as *hm=j* “my incarnation” (see Example (12)). That the use of power honorifics is an element of mandatory discernment and not a strategy to convince the addressee to comply with the sender’s requests is suggested by its compatibility with overt complaints in Cairo JE 49623³ (see Example (5)), and its embeddedness in the administrative and concise language of the Balat letters.

The pronoun replacement shows a degree of strategical volition (cf. the use of the strategy found in the honorific system of historical Chinese (Kádár 2007: 140-146)) that targets the addressee’s emotional response. Low-power honorifics that express filiation (*z3.k*, *z3t.k*) or service (*b3k jm*, *b3k.t tn*) can alternate with personal pronouns in the same document, showing a preference to use low-power honorifics in sentences of higher intimacy or when offering a service (see Example (11)). When the sender makes a requestive hint, first-person pronouns are used instead (see Examples (15) and (3)).

(15) *h3b.n=k n hr mn l tm3t l jw nfr n dd=f n(=j) jm*

You sent to me with one sheet and one mat, but he has not given anything to me (P. Elephantine 130, *rt.* 12; Fischer-Elfert 2018)

This strategical alternation of honorifics and personal pronouns implies that reciprocal community service was the expected social behaviour in collectivist Old Kingdom Egypt (Almansa-Villatoro 2020: 19-21). It is significant that the Low-power honorifics appear often accompanied by the adverb “there” *jm*. Considering that Low-power honorifics index a first-person perspective, the sender’s geographical perception would render the adverb “here” more appropriate than a distant “there”. This convention shows a solidary viewpoint merging with the sender’s adoption of the addressee’s deixis (Brown and Levinson 1987: 118-122, 204-206) to express readiness to serve beyond geographical boundaries. In the same way as the addressee is expected to understand the hint and cooperate in the request’s fulfilment, he should also appreciate the sender’s availability to partake in their shared ethical values by serving their community and by extension, the addressee himself (in line with sentiments from Ogiermann 2015: 35).

By the New Kingdom, the importance placed on honorifics and the role they played in replacing pronouns had virtually disappeared from personal letters. Within the Late Ramesside Letters, honorifics act as linguistic markers for heavily weighted superior/subordinate relationships, particularly those where it is clear that a high level of formality is needed to demonstrate deference. Really it is only in reference to the General Piankh, the highest ranked individual

³ The request itself of the letter is a litigative response to a previous vizier’s mandate. The sender of Cairo JE 49623 states that his letter sets to “contest” *mdt m* (Gardiner 1927: 77).

to appear in the corpus, who is referred to as $p^3y=n nb$ “our lord”⁴ and/or $P^3y=j nb$ “my lord”⁵ (there is a ‘lady’ mentioned within the corpus too, possibly Piankh’s wife). Additionally, Piankh can also be referred to as $p^3y=k hr.j$ “your superior”⁶, rather than his name, marking a clear distinction between the social status of Piankh and other individuals communicating within the context of the Late Ramesside Letters. Although Piankh’s name is not mentioned when “your superior” is used, all interlocutors seem to share the contextual understanding concerning who is being referred to and his social position within their relational network (Ridealgh and Jucker 2019: 61).

Although not pronoun replacement in the truest sense, in the Late Ramesside Letters, we do see an adaptation in pronouns to reflect power in the correspondence. In P. BM EA 10375⁷ is a letter sent by key necropolis officials to the General Piankh, the letter utilises a traditional greeting found within the formal introduction of the letter that is typically used between family members of socially equal individuals, however, it is adapted to reflect the power imbalance between the senders and the recipient. Rather than the usual phrase $mtw=j mh qnj=j jm=tn$ “And that I may fill my embrace with you(plural)”, or one of its variants, the phrase $mtw=n mh jr.t.j=\{t\}n m ptr=k$ “And that we may fill our eye with the sight of you” is used. This slight alteration in the address to an individual vastly superior to the senders of the letter reaffirms this social power imbalance, whilst demonstrating a certain level of familiarity and respect, but similarly acknowledging the lack of intimate contact (i.e., touch or hugging) between superiors and their subordinates (Ridealgh 2016: 260). This adaptation of language to fit such a distant superior/subordinate relationship is also reflected in the opening lines of the main body of text of the letter. Here, instead of the phrase “I have heard every matter that you sent to me”, the phrase $sdm=n mdw.t nb j.h^b n=n p^3y=n nb hr=w$ “we have heard all matters that our lord has sent to us” is used. The first version of the phrase with direct reference to the speaker and the addressee (“I”, “you”), which is most commonly used between superiors to their subordinates or between individuals of equal social status, is adapted to fit a more formal subordinate/superior dynamic by using more indirect ways of referring to the speaker (“we”) and the addressee (“our lord”) (Ridealgh and Jucker 2019: 62).

4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper we have sought to undertake a diachronic analysis of Discernment Politeness in ancient Egyptian via an analysis of Old and Late Egyptian letters, with a particular focus on request acts, information acts, and honorifics. A key point to make in this paper is that although the two letter corpora selected for this study are separated by about 1,200 years, one thing that fundamentally does not change over this period is how the social variable Power is consistently indexed within the personal letters. What does certainly change over this period is *how* Power is linguistically indexed within the letters. With regards to request acts, we see a change from indirect request acts to reduce mitigation in the Old Kingdom letters to Low-power individuals being able to use the same grammatical devices for request acts as their superiors but requiring heavy mitigation by the New Kingdom. What does not change over this time period is the frequency in which Low-power individuals could utilise request acts in letters to their superiors — it does not typically occur in any of the surviving letters from either period. With regards to information acts, it tends to be only subordinates who begin their letters confirming compliance with a previous dispatch sent by their superior but is not solely limited

⁴ P. BM 10375, v.11, v.15 (Cerný, 1939: 44-48; Wente, 1967: 59-65; 1990: 194-195).

⁵ P. Geneva D 192, rt.8 (Cerný, 1939: 33-44; Wente, 1967: 51; 1990: 185).

⁶ P. BM 10326, v.13 (Cerný, 1939: 17-21; Wente, 1967: 37-42; 1990: 190-192).

⁷ Cerný 1939: 44-48; Wente 1967: 59-65; 1990: 194-195.

to them as seen in both corpora. This intertextual referencing is attested both in the Old and New Kingdom, but the Late Ramesside Letters have preserved the greatest number of examples. Finally, in regard to the use of honorifics, we see a shift from the common place use of honorifics as pronoun replacements in the Old Kingdom letters, to honorifics being far less common in the Late Ramesside Letters. In fact, within the Late Ramesside letters, honorifics are only used when referencing one individual, the highest ranked in the letters, the General Piankh.

Brown and Levinson (1987: 74-84) argue that the seriousness of any communicative act could be estimated after taking into consideration the factors of social distance between correspondents, power of the addressee over the speaker, and the absolute ranking of such imposition within the ethical values of the culture under study. For an ancient civilization like Egypt, the values of social distance and ranking cannot be easily determined, and any argument that relies on such parameters is doomed to be hypothetical. However, in a society with such a profound sense of hierarchy and social duty as Egypt, the social variable of Power is perhaps the only variable that modern scholars can confidently assess via the clear and discernible impact on language used within the subordinate-superior relationship dynamic, one which is based on localised societal expectations and not speaker volition. In the case of the two chosen letter corpora utilised in this paper, which from distinct and spatially separate periods, the unnegotiable social norms continued to regulate which behaviours were acceptable in each specific hierarchical context and overruled individual choices. This demonstrates that the framework of Discernment Politeness presented here is applicable to all the stages of Ancient Egyptian and remains an insightful tool for assessing and reconstructing subordinate-superior linguistic patterns throughout the entirety of pharaonic history.

5. References

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