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Indirect Speech Acts in Middle English: Their Socio-Pragmatic Peculiarities in Contrast to their Modern Equivalents*

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1. Introduction

There are many politeness strategies in Modern English, including indirect speech acts. Indirect speech acts are widely employed in Modern English to make interactions more polite. Directives are one of the speech acts that are made indirectly most of the time so as not to threaten the hearer's negative face.

Diachronically speaking, modern politeness strategies emerged in the Middle English period. The strategies as used then, however, are different from those of Modern English. The politeness strategies are observed in indirect speech acts, address terms, and the pronominal system. This paper determines that the use of the indirect speech acts was limited to people of higher rank in Middle English, whereas the address terms and pronominal system were not.

2. Directives and their Relation to Politeness in Middle English and Modern English

Speakers of Modern English owe much to politeness strategies. Politeness strategies are employed so that the face of the hearer will not be threatened. The strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson apply to Modern English. In their view, face is composed of positive face, 'the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others',¹ and negative face, 'the want of every "competent adult member" that his actions be unimpeded by others'.²

Directives,³ including asking, commanding, and requesting, which threaten the negative face of the hearer, can be expressed by constructions such as *Open the window*, *I would like to VP*, and *Could you VP?* The parameter for the choice of expressions is the sociopragmatic relationship between the speaker and the hearer. Brown and Levinson propose that power, social distance, and the severity of the imposition should be taken into consideration.⁴ These strategies permeate society in the Modern English period.

Diachronically speaking, some expressions did not appear in the early stages of the history of the English language. Neither the use of the interrogative nor the past tense of the auxiliaries (phrases such as *Could you VP?*, *Would you VP?*) existed until the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively. Furthermore, in contrast to Modern English, there were few signs of politeness in Old English since society at that time was based on 'kin loyalty, a tie which seems to have been especially pervasive with regard to the bond between man and lord.'⁵

In the Middle English period there emerged two important notions closely tied to politeness: the concept of courtesy and the T/Y distinction, both of which were imported under French influence. Courtesy, defined as '[C]ourteous behaviour; courtly elegance and politeness of manners; graceful politeness or considerateness in intercourse with others' in *OED* (s.v. courtesy, n., 1. a), played an important role in the Middle English period. This manner was required for a member of the aristocracy. One instance is Chaucer's reference in *The Canterbury Tales* (hereafter, *Canterbury*) to a knight as a courteous person:

(1) *Canterbury*, I 43-46⁶

A knyght ther was, and that a worthy man,
That fro the tyme that he first bigan
To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
Trouthe and honour, fredom and *curteisie*.

As for the T/ Y distinction, the usage of the second person pronouns in the history of the English language may be summarized as follows:

(2) The usage of the second person pronouns in the history of the English language⁷

	Old English	Middle English to 16th Century	17th to 20th centuries	Late 20th century
THOU	sg.	familiar	marked	archaic
YOU	pl.	polite	unmarked	common core

While only number functioned to determine pronoun use in the Old English period, in the Middle English period social distance was also relevant to the choice of pronoun.⁸ Pronoun usage in Middle English is referred to as deference politeness because the pronouns were chosen flexibly, with reference to matters of face.⁹ The use of the Y-form is related to negative politeness.¹⁰

By the next period, Early Modern English, the use to indicate politeness became similar to Modern English.¹¹ Therefore, the Middle English period is worth examining closely as a transitional period, as is the case with morphology and syntax.

Among many theories of politeness, this study adopts the theory of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies, which is that most widely accepted and most suitable for historical texts, as shown in Kopytko's (1995) study analysing politeness strategies in Shakespeare's plays.¹²

Variations in directives can be observed in Middle English. The expressions vary according to the relationship between the speaker and the hearer. We can see an example of such variation when comparing the temptation scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (hereafter *Gawain*). In the first temptation scene, the Lady says to Gawain:

(3) *Gawain*, ll. 1297-1301¹³

‘So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden,
And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymselfen,
Couth not lyȝtly haf lenged so long wyth a lady,
Bot he had craued a cosse, bi his courtaysye,
Bi sum towch of summe tryfle at sum talez ende.’

She employs a very indirect manner of speech which does not seem to be a request at first sight, but perhaps better would be better categorized as a mere hint. Gawain certainly interprets the utterance as a request given that he replies ‘I schal kysse at your comaundement, as a knyȝt fallez,’ (l. 1304)

In the last temptation scene, in contrast, the Lady uses the bold-on-record strategy:

(4) *Gawain*, l. 1794

‘*Kysse* me now comly, and I schal cach he en,’

She makes the request with a bare imperative because their relationship is closer.¹⁴

There are similar strategies in Middle English and Modern English: in either period hints and some concepts of negative politeness are employed. While the pronominal system (T/Y distinction) has disappeared in Modern English, the same usage as in Middle English still appears in such modern languages as German and French. The use of interrogatives containing the past tense of the auxiliaries, however, was not employed in Middle English.

3. Definition of Indirect Speech Acts

Speech acts are classified into two categories: direct and indirect. Indirect speech acts are defined as those in which ‘the propositional content actually expressed differs from that which the speaker intends to convey with some illocutionary force’.¹⁵ With regard to directives, which are considered ‘particularly common’¹⁶ with indirect speech acts, previous studies have regarded imperatives as a direct and interrogatives as an indirect speech act.

The affirmative with modals, such as ‘You must record testing times for all three tests’, is categorized as an indirect speech act according to Leech, who regards the performative as direct.¹⁷

The treatment of performative sentences, however, varies. Leech classifies a performative as a direct speech act, since the performative verbs themselves include requestive meanings.¹⁸ This means that the meanings of performative verbs correspond to speech acts. When someone says, ‘I *beg* you to help me’, the speech expresses a directive because the verb *beg* itself belongs to the directive verbs.¹⁹ Bach, in contrast, thinks of the performative

as an indirect speech act.²⁰ Kohnen, who examines the directives diachronically,²¹ and Aijmer take the same view²² as Bach.

The problem with regarding the performative as a direct speech act is that the division is subject to exceptions. When we consider the sentence, ‘I promise to sack you if you don’t finish the job by this weekend’, we see that although the performative verb is *promise*, the speech act is not a promise but a threat.²³

Taking these previous studies into consideration, this paper regards performatives as indirect speech acts so as to avoid ambiguity and exceptions like the verb *promise*.

4. Data Analysis

The following texts were chosen for analysis in this study, because in these texts the relationship between the speaker and the hearer is mostly clear:

- Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*
- *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
- *The York Plays*, ‘The Dream of Pilate’s Wife’ and ‘Moses and Pharaoh’²⁴

Examination of these texts found the following constructions expressing directives in Middle English:

- a. bare-imperatives
- b. performatives (first-person subject + present-tense indicative performative verbs)
- c. want-statements (containing verbs of wanting, such as *want*, *wish*, *hope*, *desire*)
- d. auxiliaries (e.g. sentences including obligation *must*)
- e. interrogatives

We are not concerned here with directives for the third person such as ‘Somebody answer the phone, please’, because the relationship between the hearer and the speaker is ambiguous since the speaker does not indicate or recognize the hearer clearly. We classify only the bare-imperatives as direct speech acts in this study.

The social distance between the speaker and the hearer can be observed in the second person pronouns and the address terms. For high status addressees, the terms include *lord*, *lady*, and *sir*; for low status addressees, the terms include *boy* (a term also used to call a son) and *knave*.

This study classifies the data into four categories depending on the social status of the hearer and the speaker: (i) the status of the speaker (hereafter, S) = high, the status of the hearer (hereafter, H) = high; (ii) S = high, H = low; (iii) S = low, H = low; and (iv) S = low, H = high. Some selected instances are given below for discussion.

(i) S = high; H = high

(5) *Canterbury*, VII 447–451

“My lady Prioress, by youre leve,
So that I wiste I sholde yow nat greve,
I wolde demen that ye tellen sholde
A tale next, if so were that ye wolde.
Now *wol ye vouche sauf*, my lady deere?”

In *Canterbury*, the Host asks the pilgrims to tell their tales. The hearer above is the prioress. Horobin regards the dialogue as the most polite request.²⁵ The Host avoids all use of the bare-imperative and applies to the interrogative, ‘*wol ye*’, which is a negative politeness strategy: ‘question, hedge.’²⁶ The prioress thinks of the interrogative as directives because she replies ‘Gladly’ (VII 452).

(6) *Gawain*, ll. 811–812

‘Gode sir,’ quoth Gawain, ‘*woldez ou go myn ernde*
To e he3 lorde of is hous, herber to craue?’

Quotation (6) is a dialogue between Gawain and a porter. Considering the porter as the proxy of Sir Bertilak, we can assume that the status of the porter is high. Gawain emphasises courtesy and Machan proposes that he uses ‘courtly-sociolect’.²⁷ The porter replies with ‘*3e*’ (l. 813) and the phrase ‘*woldez ou*’ functions to ask the addressee to do something, as is the case in quotation (5).

(7) *Troilus*, ii. 1405–1406

Quod Pandarus, “*I pray yow that ye be
Frend to a cause which that toucheth me.*”

The speaker is Pandarus and the hearer is Deiphobus in quotation (7). Since both of them are sons of the King of Troy, their social status is high. Pandarus asks Deiphobus to support him, which he considers a burden for Deiphobus. Pandarus employs the performative verb *preien*, which can express deference and earnestness (*MED*, *preien*, v., 5).

(8) *Gawain*, l. 2252

Bot *styzel* e vpon on strok and I schal stonde style

Example (8) is a dialogue between Gawain and the Green Knight. In this scene, the Green Knight avenges the attack given him by Gawain when he visited King Arthur’s court. Gawain pretends not to fear the attack (l. 2257). This factor is likely to make Gawain employ the imperative.

Examples (6) and (8) indicate that Gawain uses the different directives in relation to the situation.

(9) ‘The Dream of Pilate’s Wife’, l. 48

Yhitt for to comforte my corse, me *muste* kisse you, madame.

The speaker is Pilate and the hearer is his wife, Uxor. The status of Pilate, a governor-general, is high. To show the high status of the hearer, he employs the address term ‘madame’, ‘used as a respectful form of address, usually to a woman of the upper classes’ (*MED*, *madame*, n.). He employs the auxiliary *moten*. The auxiliary has the impersonal usage (*MED*, *moten*, v., (2), 8), which pertains to politeness. In Brown and Levinson’s negative politeness strategy, ‘[I]mpersonalize S and H; Avoid the pronouns “I” and “you”’.²⁸ Chaucer’s use of the impersonal verbs suggests that it is ‘a polite way of expressing the speaker’s own feelings or thoughts.’²⁹

(10) ‘The First Trial before Pilate’, l. 184

Go bette, boy, *I bidde* no lenger thou byde,

The speaker is the Pilate's wife and the hearer is his child, Filius, as is indicated by the address term 'boy', which is defined as '[A] male child' (*MED*, boie, n., 4) in *MED*, indicates. In this scene, the performative is employed as is the case for the other quotations. The imperative, however, occurs in the same scene. The use of the bare-imperative in this scene is connected with solidarity between a mother and a child. In addition, Beadle (1982: 481) glosses 'Go bette' as 'begone, make haste', seemingly regarding it as a set phrase. The phrase appears three times in the York plays.³⁰

Another scene in which 'Go bette' and 'I bidde' also co-occur is the following:

(11) 'The Dream of Pilate's Wife', l. 60

Why, *go bette*, horosonne boy, when *I bidde* e.

The speaker is the same as in (10) and the hearer is Bedellus, an attendant. The status of the hearer is low since Domina says 'For all is acursed, carle, hase in, kydde thee.' (l. 63) in the following speech. The performative 'I bidde' strengthens the illocutionary force, which could not be used in consideration of the negative face of the hearer and therefore does not apply to the negative politeness strategy, '[D]on't coerce H'.³¹ Moreover, here the address term 'boy' is derogatory; *MED* defines the term as 'used derisively or contemptuously in addressing a person' (*MED*, boie, n., 3. b).

(ii) S = high; H = low

(12) *Canterbury*, VII 645-647

And seyde, "O deere child, *I halse thee*,
 In vertu of the hooly Trinitee,
 Tel me what is thy cause for to syng,

Example (12) is a dialogue between an abbot and a young child of seven (VII 503). Their respective ages serve to determine the directive expressions. The abbot, however, employs the performative 'I hales thee'. He seems to beg the child to tell why he can sing without

the use of his throat. The use of performative apparently relates to the verbs of saying which introduce this speech: ‘conjure’, which means ‘to beseech or beg (sb.), implore’ (*MED*, conjure, v., 1. b).³²

(13) *Canterbury*, VII 706

Telle us a tale of myrthe, and that anon.”

The speaker of (13) is the Host and the hearer is Sir Thopas, whom Chaucer imagines to be a bad poet. His poem is considered ‘drasty speche’ (VII 923), which represents Chaucer’s self-image. Examples (5) and (13) imply that the Host uses different directives based on the relationship between the hearer and the speaker.

In classes (i) and (ii), where the status of the speaker is high, the speaker employs both the indirect speech act and bare-imperative depending on the situation, which is similar to Modern English.

(iii) S = low; H = low

A situation in which both speaker and hearer are low is rare. The following is the scene from the dialogue between the milites:

(14) ‘The Dream of Pilate’s Wife’, l. 229

Here, ye gomes, gose a-rome, giffe us gate;

Since the milites are not given proper names, their status is apparently not high. Also, the speaker seems to be in a hurry and excited as Cayphas, the ‘pontificall prince of all prestis’ (l. 206), ordered them to ‘Do buske you’ (l. 213). These features made him use the bare-imperative.

(iv) S = low; H = high

The speaker in this situation will select his expression most carefully in Modern

English. When it is possible that the act would threaten the negative face of the hearer, the speaker chooses polite constructions such as interrogatives and the past tense of the auxiliaries. In the Middle English period, however, people of lower rank lacked care in their use of directives.

(15) *Canterbury*, IV 134-135

“*Delivere* us out of al this bisy drede,
And *taak* a wyf for hye Goddes sake,

Although the hearer is Walter, king of the Saluces, the speaker, one of the people, employs the bare-imperative. Walter does not hope to ‘taak a wyf’, and it seems impolite to ask him to do so. There are other instances where people do not employ a polite formula even when the hearer is the king, such as Moses.

(16) ‘Moses and Pharaoh’, ll. 195-196

And sen we come al of a kynne
Ken us som comforte in this case.

The hearer is Moyses and the speaker is a Jew whose name is not mentioned. It seems that the status of the hearer is not high. The writer seems to intend to show an ordinary person. The address term is ‘maistir dere’ (l. 189), used for people of high rank. The speaker, however, employs the bare-imperative.

(17) ‘Moses and Pharaoh’, ll. 342-344

Lord, ther is more myscheff, *thynk* me,
And thre daies hase itt bene durand
So myrke that non myght othir see.

Quotation (17) is a dialogue between an Egyptian and Rex; as in (16), the name of the Egyptian is not given. Although the speaker uses the term of address ‘Lord’, which is used in addressing ‘[A] person of high rank or social position’ (*MED*, lord, n., 4. a), the directive

expression is the bare-imperative, 'thynk me', which means 'pay attention to me' (*MED*, thinken, v. (2), 5. a). The bare-imperative is used for a direct speech act.

(18) 'The Dream of Pilate's Wife', 151-152

Yhe are werie, madame, forwente of youre way,

Do boune you to bedde, for that holde I beste.

In (18), the speaker is Ancilla, a servant, and the hearer is Domina, wife of Pilate. The pronoun is Y-form (polite form) and the address term is 'madame', which is 'used as a respectful form of address, usually to a woman of the upper classes' (*MED*, dame, n., 1. a). Meanwhile, the directive expression is the direct speech act, 'Do boune'. 'Do' before the main verb 'boune' functions as 'an emphatic [stressed] auxiliary verb expressing actuality, insistence, pleading, etc.' (*MED*, don, v., (1), 11), which is the opposite of negative politeness, '[D]on't coerce H',³³ as mentioned when discussing (11).

(19) *Canterbury*, III 1001-1002

And seyde, "Sir knight, heer forth ne lith no wey.

Tel me what that, ye seken, by youre fey!

In (19), the speaker is an ugly woman and the hearer is a knight. While she calls him 'sir', a term of address for nobility and royalty, and uses the polite pronoun, she also uses the bare-imperative. The use of the bare-imperative is associated with the rank of the speaker.

In category (iv), a speaker of higher rank carefully chooses the term of address, as is the case in Modern English, while a speaker of lower rank does not speak with indirect speech acts.

The address terms and the pronominal system were applied widely by most of the people in the Middle English period. Conversely, the use of indirect speech acts was limited to people of higher rank. The differences in the speed of penetration of these strategies among speakers appears to have depended on linguistic patterns. The part of speech of the former, most frequently borrowed from other languages, is a noun. One such address term, *madam*, was borrowed from French. The distinction in the pronominal usage (T/Y) was

borrowed from French in the 13th century and Chaucer soon employed it effectively. On the other hand, some of indirect speech acts belong to constructions such as the use of interrogatives which only rarely are borrowed in comparison to other linguistic categories, including suffixes and inflections.³⁴

5. Conclusion

Modern politeness strategies, which pay attention to negative face, emerged in the upper classes of English society in the Middle English period. The difference between the Middle and Modern English period lies in who uses indirect speech acts. There are no instances where lower class speakers employed indirect speech acts in some texts of Middle English (*Canterbury*, *Troilus*, *Gawain* and two dramas in the York Plays), whereas they commonly do in Modern English. While the address terms and pronominal system were widely used by all classes, indirect speech acts were not employed by the lower. The results of this study may be summarised as follows:

(20) Summary of the present study

	Similar to ModE	Different from ModE
ME Politeness strategies	Address terms Pronominal systems	User of the indirect speech acts

The difference in the speed of their spread depends on the category of each strategy. Those strategies similar to ModE involve nouns, whereas those different from ModE are related to constructions.

The use of the bare-imperative may be correlated with solidarity and positive politeness. Whereas this study chiefly treats the aspects of negative politeness. There is a possibility that we can find positive politeness strategies in the Middle English period through analysing other speech acts.

NOTES

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- 1 P. Brown and S. C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 62.
- 2 Brown and Levinson, p. 62.
- 3 While many definitions of speech acts have been proposed, this study adopts Searle's most widely accepted theory, proposed in *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, ed. by John R. Searle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).
- 4 Brown and Levinson, p. 76.
- 5 Thomas Kohnen, 'Linguistic Politeness in Anglo-Saxon England: A Study of Old English Address Terms', *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, 9:1 (2008), 140-158, (p. 142).
- 6 The edition of Chaucer's works for this study is *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson and others, 3rd. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). All italics in quotations are mine, along with other texts' quotations.
- 7 Katie Wales, *Personal Pronouns in Present-Day English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 77.
- 8 In regard to the second pronouns in Shakespeare (the Early Modern English period), see Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, *Shakespeare's Insults: A Pragmatic Dictionary* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 401. She states that *thou* may be received as an insult. *Thou* in Modern English appears in the Quakers.
- 9 Andreas H. Jucker, 'Changes in Politeness Cultures' in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of English*, ed. by Terttu Nevalainen and Elizabeth Closs Traugott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 422-433, (pp. 426-428).
- 10 Laurel J. Brinton, 'Historical Pragmatic Approaches' in *English Historical Linguistics: Approaches and Perspectives*, ed. by Laurel J. Brinton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 245-275, (p. 248).
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- 22 Karin Aijmer, *Conversational Routines in English* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 149.
- 23 Yan Huang, *Pragmatics*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 138.
- 24 The edition of *The York Plays* for this study is *The York Plays*, ed. by Richard Beadle
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- 26 Brown and Levinson, p.145.
- 27 Tim William Machan, *English in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003),
p. 156.
- 28 Brown and Levinson, p. 190.
- 29 Hideshi Ohno, *Variation between Personal and Impersonal Constructions in Geoffrey*
Chaucer: A Stylistic Approach (Okayama: University Education Press, 2015), p. 27.
- 30 The situation where 'go better' appears is p. 139, l. 133; p. 256, l. 60; and p. 259, l. 184 in
Beadle's edition.
- 31 Brown and Levinson, p. 172.
- 32 Although the verb *conjure* appears three times in the Chaucer's works, the usage that
introduces speech is only observed in this example.
- 33 Brown and Levinson, p. 172.
- 34 Einar Haugen, 'The Analysis of Linguistic Borrowing', *Language*, 26 (1950), 210-231, (p.
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