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Politeness in Early Modern English dialogues: The case of Ben Jonson's *Volpone, or The Fox*[1]

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1.   Introduction

According to lexical evidence, politeness in the English language can be traced back to the Middle English period where the French language provided the lexical means to talk about a kind of behaviour that might have been imported together with the terms describing it (see for instance Jucker 2010, forthc.). Words such as *courtesy*, *debonair*, *hend*, *courteous*, *gracious*, or *gentle* are first attested in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[2] This does not necessarily mean, of course, that before that time English was devoid of politeness. But there is now a fairly substantial amount of evidence to suggest that Anglo-Saxon politeness differed considerably from what we, from a present-day perspective, would call polite. In an earlier paper (Jucker 2010), I argued that Middle English provides a bridge between Old English and Modern English not only for the traditional levels of linguistic description, i.e. phonology, morphology and syntax, but also for the pragmatic level and in particular for politeness. It bridges Anglo-Saxon forms of politeness with the more recognizably Modern forms of politeness. According to Kohnen (2008) Anglo-Saxon forms of politeness were based on the Germanic values of "mutual obligation" and "kin loyalty" and the additional Christian values of *humilitas* and *caritas*. Such forms were not primarily concerned with enhancing and maintaining face in the sense of Brown and Levinson (1987).

This means that Early Modern English politeness is in a recognizable way a form of Modern English politeness and relatively close to Present-day politeness. Kopytko (1993, 1995) has argued on the basis of his data of plays by William Shakespeare that Early Modern English reflects a fundamentally positive politeness culture while Present-day English reflects a negative politeness culture. Such a claim is not unproblematic but it is clear that at least those typical features of Present-day English negative politeness, such as the indirect request ("Could you possibly …", "Would it be possible for you …", etc.) are relatively recent in the history of English and do not go much further back than the nineteenth century (see also Wierzbicka 2006, Jucker forthc.). Thus, it seems worthwhile to have a fresh look at the issue of politeness in Early Modern English dialogues. As a

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[1]   Volpone 3.2.12 (All quotations are based on Campbell 1995). My thanks for comments on this paper go to the audience at the Cagliari conference and in particular to Daniela Landert, Miriam Locher and Irma Taavitsainen, who have read a draft version of this paper and provided valuable suggestions and corrections. The usual disclaimers apply.

[2]   These are some of the words found under the heading "courtesy" and "courteous" in the *Historical Thesaurus* and the dating (based on the *Oxford English Dictionary*) given there (http://www.oed.com)

case study I shall have a look at a play by one of Shakespeare's contemporary playwrights, i.e. Ben Jonson, and in particular his play *Volpone, or The Fox*, first performed in London in 1606. It is a satire of greed and lust with exuberant schemes of ingratiation, deceit and corruption, and as such it is particularly suited to such an analysis. The surface politeness of the characters is regularly at odds with the darker motives underlying the stratagems pursued by the characters.

However, the aim of this paper is not just descriptive. The more important aim is theoretical in that I want to propose an alternative way of analysing issues of politeness in historical data. So far, historical analyses, and in particular analyses of Early Modern English data, have largely been based on the framework proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), for instance in the work of Brown and Gilman (1989), Kopytko (1995) and Bouchara (2009). In recent years politeness scholars have developed new ways of analysing politeness, in particular so-called discursive or post-modern approaches (see e.g. Watts 2003, 2005; Locher and Watts 2005; Locher 2006). While the Brown and Levinson approach focused mainly on individual utterances and the speaker intention encoded in these utterances, a discursive or post-modern approach focuses on the interaction between conversationalists and how politeness is negotiated in communicative exchanges. It is my aim to apply a discursive approach to my Early Modern English fictional data in order to discuss the potential and the limitations of such an approach for historical data.

In section 2, I am going to present an overview of the relevant literature on politeness in Early Modern English as a backdrop to my own study. In section 3, I will develop the necessary methodology. In section 4, I will apply this approach to selected passages from Ben Jonson's play *Volpone or The Fox*.

2.   Early approaches to politeness in Early Modern English

Brown and Gilman (1989) were the first to propose a systematic, politeness-based analysis of Early Modern English data. They used Brown and Levinson's (1987) model for an analysis of four tragedies by William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*. They are particularly interested in Brown and Levinson's claims that the weightiness of a face threat can be established on the basis of the power relationship between the speaker and the addressee, the distance between them and the ranked extremity of the face threat in a given society. In order to test this claim they analyse pairs of scenes which differ only on one of these dimension. They score these scenes for politeness and then assess whether the result conforms with the prediction of the theory. On the basis of their data, they conclude that the results for the power dimension and the intrinsic extremity of the face threat are those predicted by the theory, but the dimension of distance between the interlocutors are not. In fact, they found that it is the affect between the speaker and the addressee which most clearly influences the politeness level. If characters like each other, they are polite, if they don't, they aren't, or in their rather more careful wording, "increased liking increases politeness and decreased liking decreases politeness" (Brown and Gilman 1989: 159).

In order to assess the politeness of the passages, Brown and Gilman rely on a categorization of substrategies of positive and negative politeness. These are modelled on the basis of Brown and Levinson's strategies and their distinction between positive and

negative politeness, where positive politeness is addressed to the positive face wants of the addressee, i.e. his or her wish to be appreciated and liked by others, and negative politeness to the negative face wants of the addressee, i.e. his or her wish to be free from imposition. The following examples illustrate their categorization (Brown and Gilman 1989: 167).

(1)   Notice admirable qualities, possession, etc.
        First Senator: Adieu, brave Moor. (*Othello*, I, *iii*, 286)
        Desdemona: Alas, thrice-gentle Cassio. (*Othello*, III, *iv*, 122)

(2)   Use in-group identity markers in speech.
        Hamlet (to Horatio): Sir, my good friend, I'll change that name with you. (I, *ii*, 163)

(3)   Avoid possible disagreement by hedging your statements.
        Knight (to King Lear): My lord, I know not what the matter is; but to my judgement (I, *iv*, 57-58)

Examples (1) to (3) illustrate substrategies of positive politeness that are addressed to the addressee's wish to be appreciated and liked by others. Examples (4) to (6) illustrate substrategies of negative politeness (Brown and Gilman 1989: 168).

(4)   Be conventionally indirect.
        Iago (to Othello): You were best go in. (I, *ii*, 29)
        Banquo: Worthy Macbeth, we stay upon your leisure [convenience]. (I, *iii*, 148)

(5)   Give deference.
        Othello (to the Duke and Venetian Senators): Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors, My very noble and approved good masters. (I, *iii*, 76-77)

(6)   Go on record as incurring a debt
        Queen to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: Your visitation shall receive such thanks as fits a king's remembrance. (*Hamlet* II, *ii*, 25-26)

In extract (4) the speakers of the two examples state their request in an indirect way, and thus make it clear that they are not imposing on the addressee. In (5) the speaker uses a deferential formulation to address the Duke and the Venetian Senators. This, too, is seen as a sign of non-imposition. And in (6) the speaker explicitly refers to her indebtedness to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Brown and Gilman's study has been replicated and extended to Shakespeare's comedies both by Kopytko (1993, 1995) and by Bouchara (2009). Kopytko (1993, 1995) used more or less the same classification of substrategies in order to investigate an increased set of plays by Shakespeare. In addition to the four tragedies analysed by Brown and Gilman, he added four comedies, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*. In contrast to Brown and Gilman, who use the model only to assess minimally contrasting scenes, Kopytko counts the frequency of the substrategies in his data in order to quantify the politeness level of the individual plays and to contrast tragedies and comedies. In both types of plays he finds a significantly higher number of positive politeness strategies. He concludes:

> I tentatively assume that the high rate of occurrence of positive politeness strategies in Shakespeare's plays characterises the interactional style or 'ethos' of Elizabethan society. (…) If both claims, i.e. about the Elizabethan society and modern British society, are at least to some degree true, it may be tentatively proposed that the interactional style or 'ethos' of British society has evolved from the dominating positive politeness culture in the 16th century towards the modern negative politeness culture. (Kopytko 1995: 531-2)

In the meantime research into politeness issues has made a lot of progress. There is indeed corroborating evidence for Kopytko's tentative statement. The typical features of negative politeness, such as conventional indirectness illustrated in extracts (7) to (9) are relatively recent (see Wierzbicka 2006; examples taken from the *British National Corpus*).

(7)   Could you possibly go a little slower? (CEX 1237)

(8)   Would you talk to me for a few minutes? (A0R 137)

(9)   Can I ask you to do something for me today please? (F8M 3)

Bouchara (2009) applied Brown and Gilman's (1989) model of analysing Shakespeare to four comedies, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Twelfth Night*. The study very faithfully follows its model and does not extend the analytical apparatus. In fact, it completely ignores the vast amount of research on politeness published in the twenty years since Brown and Gilman (1989). Not even Kopytko is mentioned.

However, research into politeness issues has also moved away from the work of Brown and Levinson. It has increasingly become clear that it is problematic to focus on single utterances and to assign politeness values to them on the basis of some linguistic forms that are used in these utterances. It is not enough to focus on the speaker and his or her intention. The interaction between all the interlocutors that are involved in a conversation must be taken more seriously, and this has led to a discursive (or post-modern) approach to politeness, which provides a more comprehensive picture of the discursive negotiation of politeness in interaction. Such an approach shall be introduced in the next section.

Early Modern English politeness has also been investigated from the point of view of the use of terms of address, in particular the use of singular *thou* and *ye* on the one hand, and the use of vocatives, or nominal terms of address, on the other. This work, too, has focused to a large extent on Shakespearean plays. Some of this work goes back to the sixties, seventies and early eighties of the last century (e.g. Mulholland 1967; Quirk 1971 and Breuer 1983). But it has also seen a great popularity in recent years (e.g. U. Busse 2002; Mazzon 2003; Stein 2003 and B. Busse 2006). U. Busse and B. Busse (2010) and Mazzon (2010) provide a detailed survey of this work. In addition there is also a considerable amount of work on terms of address in other text types, e.g. in correspondence (Nevala 2004; Palander-Collin 2006) or in trials (e.g. Walker 2007).

Hope (2003: 73), in his grammar of Shakespeare, describes the basic choice between *thou* and *ye* (and their case forms) as follows:

> The basic factor determining choice of *th-* or *y-*pronoun in Early Modern English is social relationship: *th-*forms are used *down* the social hierarchy; *y-*forms *up* it. This means that those in

authority – kings, lords, husbands, fathers, masters – can use *th*-forms to those in subordinate roles: subjects, vassals, wives, children, servants. Subordinates use *y*-forms in return. Social equals usually exchange mutual *y*-forms in the Early Modern period. (italics original)

However, things are often more complex. Pronoun choices can often not be evaluated on a straightforward turn-by-turn basis. For this reasons, many scholars have focused on individual speaker dyads, for instance in plays, and the balance of *thou*-forms and *ye*-forms that both members of the dyad use for each other (e.g. Stein 2003; Mazzon 2003). Or they analyse pronominal terms of address and their frequencies in relation to nominal terms of address.

U. Busse (2002, 2003), for instance, analyses individual nominal terms of address and how often they co-occur with a *thou*-form or a *ye*-form, i.e. their so-called *thou*- or *you*-fulness. In order to calculate specific values of *thou*- or *you*-fulness, he uses the logarithm of the division of the frequencies of Y and T. If the frequencies are identical, the division equals 1 and the logarithm is 0. If the frequency of Y is higher than that of T, the division is larger than one and the logarithm positive, if Y is smaller, the division is smaller than 1 and the logarithm is negative. A logarithm of +1 indicates that Y is ten times as frequent as T, and a logarithm of -1 that T is ten times as frequent as Y. Negative values indicate *thou*-ful terms of address, i.e. terms of address that tend to co-occur more often with *thou* than with *you*, while positive values indicate the opposite, *you*-ful terms of address.

Terms of endearment, such as *bully, chuck, heart, joy, love* or *wag* (U. Busse 2003: 214) show the highest predominance of *thou* over *you*. Terms of abuse, such as *devil, dog, fool, knave, rascal, rogue*; and generic terms of address, such as *boy, friend, gentleman, gentlewoman* or *lad* also co-occur more often with *thou* than with *you* but not to the same extent as terms of endearment. The remaining three categories of terms of address co-occur more often with *you* than with *thou* in Shakespeare's work. These are terms indicating family relationships, such as *brother, cousin, coz, daughter, father* or *husband*; terms of address indicating occupation, such as *captain, doctor, esquire, justice, knight* or *nurse*; and titles of courtesy, such as *Your Grace, Your (royal) Highness, Your Honour, Your Ladyship, Goodman, goodwife, lady, lord* or *sir*.

These results suggest that the *thou*-forms are used together with terms of endearment to express intimacy and together with terms of abuse to express contempt and lack of respect. The predominant co-occurrence with terms of courtesy and occupation, on the other hand, indicates that *ye*-forms are used to indicate deference and respect. The fact that terms of family relationship also occur more often with *ye*-forms than with *thou*-forms indicates that solidarity does not automatically call for *thou*-forms.

3.   Methodology

As pointed out above, in recent years politeness theory has moved away from Brown and Levinson (1987) and has adopted a discursive or post-modern approach. Brown and Levinson's approach is squarely based on Goffman's (1967) notion of face, in which politeness is seen as rational, rule-governed activity. Every participant is concerned for his or her own face wants and, therefore, carefully attends to the face wants of his or her interlocutors. Brown and Levinson, moreover, put their focus on the mitigation of face-threatening acts (FTAs), i.e. people's endeavours to avoid conflicts. More recent research has adopted a much broader perspective. Conflict avoidance is seen as one end of the

scale from polite behaviour to impolite behaviour with a very large middle ground of neutral behaviour that is neither polite nor impolite, i.e. forms of behaviour which follow the norms of society by choosing sociolinguistically appropriate styles and forms, "that behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction" (Watts 2003: 21).

In a discursive approach to politeness, this middle ground of sociolinguistically appropriate behaviour is taken seriously, and it is usually called "politic behaviour" to distinguish it from strategically polite behaviour on one side and from impolite behaviour on the other. Such an approach also distinguishes between what has come to be known as politeness$_1$ and politeness$_2$, where politeness$_1$ refers to the everyday notion of politeness, the way that interlocutors use and evaluate the term, while politeness$_2$ refers to technical definitions of the term (see Watts 2010 for an overview). In that sense, Brown and Levinson's notion of politeness is an instance of politeness$_2$ because it depends on a specific (and fairly narrow) definition. According to the proponents of a discursive approach to politeness, the analytical focus should be on politeness$_1$, i.e. on the way in which politeness is discursively negotiated in real interactions by the interlocutors. A discursive approach, moreover, does not focus exclusively on the speaker who produces polite utterances and, crucially, it does not assign specific default politeness values to specific linguistic forms. Locher and Watts (2005: 15) illustrate this point with the following examples.

(10)   Oi! Pen!

(11)   Lend me your pen.

(12)   Could you lend me your pen?

(13)   I wonder whether you would be so very kind as to lend me your pen?

These are different ways for asking for a pen. A Brown and Levinsonian type of approach would assign default values to these forms in the sense that (10) is the least polite form and (13) the most polite form. However, Locher and Watts argue that these utterances do not have inherent or intrinsic politeness values. Depending on the situation, all of them can be polite or impolite.

> Depending upon the kind of verbal social behavior in which individuals engage, they will adapt their relational work to what is considered appropriate. Given that this is the case, it is not valid to refer to conflictual and aggressive behavior as inherently "impolite", "rude", or "discourteous". But neither is it valid to classify excessively formal or indirect behavior as automatically "polite", "polished" or "distinguished". Hence no utterance is inherently polite. (Locher and Watts 2005: 29)

I agree with the general point that utterances are not inherently polite or impolite, but, as I will show in more detail in my analysis of Ben Jonson's *Volpone, or The Fox*, it is important to realize that the linguistic expressions themselves, such as those in (10) to (13), do have semantic, i.e. more or less intrinsic politeness values, which on specific occasions my interact in various ways with the pragmatic, i.e. contextualized politeness values (see Culpeper 2011: 117-126 for an extensive discussion of the issue of intrinsic or non-intrinsic politeness values). In fact, it is the interplay between the intrinsic politeness value of the linguistic forms and the discursive contexts in which they are used which

decides whether an utterance comes across as interactionally appropriate, as impolite or rude, or as excessively over-polite and perhaps ironic. Name-calling and swearing, for instance, are intrinsically impolite because of their long-standing and routine associations with impolite contexts, but in specific contexts, e.g. banter in certain circles of good friends, they may come across as friendly. With increased use in such "polite" contexts, swear words may ultimately lose their emotional charge and their inherent impoliteness.

A discursive approach to politeness focuses on the interactants' discursive negotiations of politeness values. In the formulation of Locher and Watts (2005: 16):

> We consider it important to take native speaker assessments of politeness seriously and to make them the basis of a discursive, data-driven, bottom-up approach to politeness. The discursive dispute over such terms in instances of social practice should represent the locus of attention for politeness research. By discursive dispute we do not mean real instances of disagreement amongst members of a community of practice over the terms "polite", "impolite", etc. but rather the discursive structuring and reproduction of forms of behavior and their potential assessments (…) by individual participants.

In a historical context, this is difficult because there are only few extracts in which politeness issues are discussed explicitly. However, there are a few famous passages in Early Modern English in which politeness issues are explicitly commented on. B. Busse has drawn attention to the following passage from Shakespeare's *King Henry VI, Part 3*, in which King Henry reflects on the semantic values of address terms.

(14)   Richard   Good day, my lord. What, at your book so hard?
       King Henry   Ay, my good lord -- my lord, I should say rather.
                      'Tis sin to flatter; 'good' was little better:
                      'Good Gloucester' and 'good devil' were alike,
                      And both preposterous; therefore not 'good lord.'
                      (3H6 5.6.1-5, King Henry VI, Part 3; quoted after
                      B. Busse 2006: 210)

This exchange takes place in the tower where King Henry is captured by Richard and his followers. This is one of the final interchanges between the two rivals before King Henry's abdication and his death. King Henry uses the conventional term of address, "my good lord", but then self-corrects and changes it to "my lord" because of the semantic value of "good", which, according to him, does not apply to Richard. This illustrates the sensitivity of nominal terms of address and the ambivalence between conventional forms and their semantic meaning.

The next extract is also taken from Shakespeare. In the comedy *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby urges Sir Andrew, who is in love with Olivia, to compose a challenge to Cesario, whom Sir Andrew believes to be a suitor of Olivia.

(15)   Sir To: Go, write it in a martial hand, be curst and brief. It is no matter how witty, so it be eloquent and full of invention. Taunt him with the license of ink. If thou thou'st him some thrice, it shall not be amiss; and as many lies as will lie in thy sheet of paper, although the sheet were big enough for the bed of Ware in England, set 'em down. Go, about it. Let there be gall enough in thy ink, though thou write with a goose-pen, no matter. About it. (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, III.ii.42–50) Quoted from *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Evans 1974).

From this passage it becomes clear what kind of politeness, or rather impoliteness, value Sir Toby assigns to the use of a *thou*-form. As a form of address from Sir Andrew to Cesario it would add to the insult of the challenge and it would amount to "taunting" Cesario.

The next passage is drawn from the trial of Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618), who was an English courtier, explorer, writer, and favorite of Elizabeth I. He was imprisoned and tried for treason under James I, and beheaded in 1618.

(16)   Raleigh: I do not hear yet, that you have spoken one word against me; here is no
         Treason of mine done: If my Lord Cabham be a Traitor, what is that to me?
         Attorney: All that he did was by thy Instigation, thou Viper; for I thou thee, thou
         Traitor.
         (*Helsinki Corpus*: E2 XX TRI RALEIGH I, 208)

The Attorney here uses the *thou*-form for Sir Walter Raleigh and comments on his own usage. Normally the social status of the defendant and the formality of the court setting would require a *you*-form, but the Attorney is convinced of Raleigh's guilt, and, therefore, uses *thou* to address him, and, in fact, the insulting pronoun is accompanied by equally insulting nominal terms of address, "viper" and "traitor" (see also Taavitsainen and Jucker 2007: 125; Jucker 2008: 15)

Such passages are very illuminating because they give us a relatively direct insight into the evaluations of specific linguistic forms by fictional or real speakers of Early Modern English. But a discursive or post-modern approach to politeness can also rely on normal interaction as pointed out above in the quotation by Locher and Watts. In such an approach, politeness is always seen as being subject to discursive struggles. Interlocutors negotiate their levels of politeness either explicitly (as in the above examples) or implicitly. Decontextualized linguistic items cannot be analysed as polite or impolite. The analysis must focus on the relational work of the interactants. (Im)politeness emerges in the interaction (see Culpeper 2008: 21). In the following I will, therefore, focus on selected passages of Ben Jonson's *Volpone, or The Fox* in order to uncover the interaction between the semantic (im)politeness levels of the linguistic expressions and the pragmatic effects in the given contexts. In this undertaking, the fictional nature of the data is an advantage because it gives the analyst a privileged insight into the deeper motives of the interactants, but, obviously, it does not allow us any far-reaching conclusions beyond the narrow realms of the data.

4.   Ben Jonson's *Volpone, or The Fox*

Ben Jonson's play *Volpone, or The Fox* was first performed in London in 1605. It is a play about greed and deceit. Volpone (the Fox), a wealthy Venetian gentleman, feigns to be on his deathbed in order to attract greedy fortune hunters. Voltore (the Vulture), Corbaccio (the Raven) and Corvino (the Carrion Crow) try to ingratiate themselves in order to inherit Volpone's fortunes. Mosca (the Fly), Volpone's servant, tells each of them that Volpone has made him the sole heir in order to keep up their hopes and to get them to bring even more presents. In the third scene of the first act, Volpone receives one suitor after the other at what he would like his visitors to believe is his deathbed. In extract (17), Mosca announces Voltore, who presents Volpone with an expensive plate.

(17)

VOLPONE	Bring him near, where is he?	
	I long to feel his hand.	
MOSCA	The plate is here, sir.	15
VOLTORE	How fare you, sir?	
VOLPONE	I thank you, Signor Voltore;	
	Where is the plate? Mine eyes are bad.	
VOLTORE	[*gives the plate to Volpone*] I'm sorry,	
	To see you still thus weak.	
MOSCA	[*Aside*.] That he is not weaker.	
VOLPONE	You are too munificent.	
VOLTORE	No sir, would to heaven,	
	I could as well give health to you, as that plate!	20
VOLPONE	You give, sir, what you can. I thank you. Your love	
	Hath taste in this, and shall not be unanswered.	
	I pray you see me often.	
VOLTORE	Yes, I shall sir.	

(Volpone 1.3.14-23)

In this scene both Volpone and Voltore act with cunning and highly strategically. Volpone tries to project his terminal illness and his (conditional) benevolence towards Voltore. Voltore tries to project his concern and good will in order to be adopted as an heir. An analysis on the basis of Brown and Gilman's (1989) and Kopytko's (1993, 1995) strategies of positive and negative politeness would reveal very little. All three characters use the deferential term of address *sir*. Volpone and Voltore address each other with this term (lines 16, 19, 21, 24) and Mosca uses it to address his master (line 15). Volpone also uses the term of address "Signor Voltore" (line 16). In a Brown and Levinsonian framework this would be a negative politeness strategy. In addition Volpone uses a positive politeness strategy when he gives reasons for his request to Mosca to show Voltore in ("I long to feel his hand", line 15), and he uses a negative politeness strategy (go on record as incurring a debt) when he vaguely alludes "Your love … shall not be unanswered" (lines 21, 22). If we add the concept of politic language use (e.g. Watts 2003), we can observe that the terms of address are the forms that are socially expected. They are not used strategically to avert some impending face threat. Volpone's request to Mosca to show in Voltore is issued without any adornment. It comes in the form of an unmitigated imperative ("bring him near", line 15). In fact, the entire passage seems to be in the form of politic language use.

However, discursively a lot is going on in this passage and the spectators can derive their pleasure from seeing through the double layers. Voltore's question about Volpone's health (line 16) is acknowledged ("I thank you") but not answered. Presumably the actor will give some of the answer in his tone of voice that suggests that he is very weak and unlikely to rise again from his deathbed. The humour also derives from the fact that the question "How fare you my sir" is prototypically uttered in the hope to hear a positive answer, but the audience knows that Voltore has high hopes to hear a negative answer. Volpone complies with this wish but only in his gestures and his voice but not in the words he uses. Volpone wants to touch the plate under the pretence of his bad eyesight.

Apparently, he also pretends to be too weak to hold the plate. So Voltore expresses his concern for Volpone's weakness, and the audience knows again that this weakness is exactly what Voltore had been hoping for, an interpretation that is reinforced by Mosca's aside to the audience in line 18. Finally, Voltore expresses his wish to give his own health to Volpone, even though it is completely transparent that he wishes exactly the opposite. Finally, Volpone urges Voltore to visit him regularly ("I pray you see me often", line 24), which Voltore is likely to see as a positive sign in his quest to become Volpone's favourite and ultimately his heir, while for Volpone it is just a way of receiving more presents. Thus the veneer of civility and politic language thinly veils the motives of the characters, and the audience can enjoy the large contrast of the politic and polite interaction with the darker motives of the interactants.

Soon afterwards, the stratagems of intrigue and deceit reach a different level. Mosca persuades Corbaccio to disinherit his own son in favour of Volpone (1.4.87-123). This would convince Volpone of Corbaccio's love and it would seal Corbaccio's position as Volpone's heir. This would only be temporary, Mosca argues, since Volpone's death is imminent.

At the beginning of act 3, Corbaccio's son Bonario arrives on the scene because he suspects some wrongdoing, and he strongly dislikes both Volpone and his servant Mosca. As yet, he does not know what has happened. He has not yet learned of the plot that would disinherit him. But he does not want to interact with Mosca because of his strong dislike.

(18)
[*Enter*] *Bonario*

MOSCA   Who's this? Bonario? Old Corbaccio's son?
             The person I was bound to seek. Fair sir,
             You are happ'ly met.
BONARIO   That cannot be by thee.
MOSCA   Why, sir?
BONARIO   Nay, 'pray thee know thy way, and leave me;
             I would be loath to interchange discourse   5
             With such a mate as thou art.
MOSCA   Courteous sir,
             Scorn not my poverty.
BONARIO   Not I, by heaven—
             But thou shalt give me leave to hate thy baseness.
MOSCA   Baseness?
BONARIO   Aye, answer me, is not thy sloth
             Sufficient argument? Thy flattery?   10
             Thy means of feeding?
MOSCA   Heaven, be good to me.
             These imputations are too common, sir,
             And easily stuck on virtue when she's poor;
             You are unequal to me, and howe'er,
             Your sentence may be righteous, yet you are not,   15
             That ere you know me, thus proceed in censure;

St Mark bear witness 'gainst you, 'tis inhuman.

[*He weeps*]

BONARIO   [*aside.*]: What? Does he weep? The sign is soft and good!

I do repent me that I was so harsh.

(Volpone 3.2.1-19)

A Brown and Levinson analysis would again focus on positive and negative politeness strategies employed by both characters. Mosca in his obsequious attempt to interact with Bonario uses the positive politeness strategy of exaggerating sympathy and approval ("you are happ'ly met", line 3) and the negative politeness strategy of deferential terms of address (e.g. "fairy sir", line 2; "courteous sir", line 6). Bonario also uses politeness strategies when he asks Mosca to move on. He uses the negatively polite phrase "pray thee" (line 4), and he provides a reason for his request (another negative politeness strategy), even if the justification for his request is a face-threatening act in itself. He uses a further negative politeness strategy when he veils the face threat of his unfavorable opinion of Mosca; "Thou shalt give me leave to hate thy baseness" (line 8). But such an account would not do justice to the very different attitudes of the two characters. Mosca's obsequiousness contrasts with Bonario's more or less open hostility.

In contrast to the scene between Volpone and Voltore analysed above, Bonario does not hide his dislike of Mosca. He states openly that he does not want to talk to him, and that he hates his baseness, sloth, flattery and his position as a "parasite" ("thy means of feeding", lines 8-11). But these sentiments are couched in polite, or perhaps rather politic, phrases. The terms of address that are used by Mosca and Bonario conform to the expectations. Mosca, the servant uses *you* to Bonario, the gentleman, while the gentleman uses *thou* to the servant. In a discursive approach, it is not sufficient to say that the phrases "I pray thee" and "thou shalt give me leave" are impolite in this scene. The effect of the scene derives from the fact that the default politeness of these phrases is diametrically opposed to the hostility of the character who uses them towards his interlocutor.

From the audience's point of view, Mosca's servile politeness comes across as insincere, while Bonario's polite hostility comes across as sincere and honorable. This is only possible because of the contrast of the inherent politeness values of the phrases, such as "courteous sir" or "thou shalt give me leave" with the context of their actual use. Mosca's use of such phrases is in conflict with his devious intentions, while in Bonario's case they reinforce the sincerity of his face-threatening and impolite attitudes that he expresses towards Mosca.

At the end of this passage, we get a rare comment by one of the characters on his politeness level. After Mosca's skilful strategy of redirecting Bonario's hostility to his own poverty and his weeping, Bonario regrets having been "so harsh". Thus, Bonario comments on the politeness level of his own utterances and he evaluates them as "harsh". Clearly, he is concerned with the sentiments that he expressed about Mosca's baseness, sloth and flattery, and not about the veneer of polite phrases that he used for the purpose. This adds further to our interpretation of the polite phrases ("I pray thee", "thou shalt give me leave") as polite in spite of the hostility of the context.

Back in the second act, Volpone was enraptured by the beauty of Corvino's wife, Celia, and he immediately decided that he wanted to have her for his own. Mosca, the

parasite, is sent out to find a way of extricating Celia from her jealous husband. So, Mosca tells Corvino that, for medical reasons, his master requires sex with a young woman, and he insinuates that Corvino's chances to become Volpone's heir would be greatly increased if he could provide a suitable woman for the purposes. Predictably Corvino can only think of his own wife and immediately proceeds to offer her to Volpone. However, Celia is horrified by her husband's indecent suggestion and afterwards by Volpone's advances. Volpone fails to seduce her and when he wants to take her by force, Bonario intervenes and rescues her. In the ensuing courtroom scene, Mosca, Volpone and the three dupes collude to utterly confuse the issues. Instead of Volpone, it is Celia and Bonario who seem to be accused. Corbaccio accuses his son and Corvino accuses his wife (extract 19).

(19)

NOTARO	Your testimony's craved.	
CORBACCIO	Speak to the knave?	105
	I'll ha' my mouth first stopped with earth; my heart	
	Abhors his knowledge; I disclaim in him.	
1ST AVVOCATO But for what cause?		
CORBACCIO	The mere portent of nature.	
	He is an utter stranger to my loins.	
BONARIO	Have they made you to this?	
CORBACCIO	I will not hear thee,	110
	Monster of men, swine, goat, wolf, parricide!	
	Speak not, thou viper.	
BONARIO	Sir, I will sit down,	
	And rather wish my innocence should suffer,	
	Than I resist the authority of a father.	
VOLTORE	Signor Corvino!	
2ND AVVOCATO	This is strange!	
1ST AVVOCATO	Who's this?	115
NOTARO	The husband.	
4TH AVVOCATO	Is he sworn?	
NOTARO	He is.	
3RD AVVOCATO	Speak then.	
CORVINO	This woman, please your fatherhoods, is a whore	
	Of most hot exercise, more than a partridge,	
	Upon recòrd—	
1ST AVVOCATO	No more.	
CORVINO	Neighs like a jennet.	
NOTARO	Preserve the honour of the court.	
CORVINO	I shall,	120
	And modesty of your most reverend ears.	
	And yet I hope that I may say, these eyes	
	Have seen her glued unto that piece of cedar,	
	[*Indicating Bonario*]	
	That fine well-timbered gallant: and that, here,	

                    That make the story perfect.
        (Volpone 4.5.105-126)

This is a violently impolite passage in which first Corbaccio seriously insults his own son, Bonario, and then Corvino follows suit by seriously insulting his own wife, Celia. They do this by calling them names. Corbaccio calls his son "Monster of men, swine, goat, wolf, parricide" (line 111) and "viper" (line 112). Corvino goes even further and calls his wife a "whore" (line 117), a "partridge" (line 118), and a "jennet" (line 119). Campbell (1995: 457) in his notes to the play points out that these animals are "associated with filth (swine), lechery (goat and partridge), cruelty (wolf), filial ingratitude (viper), and resistance to discipline (jennet, a Spanish breed of horse)". Corvino further claims to have seen his wife glued to Bonario, whom he calls a "piece of cedar" (line 123), which is characterized as "tall, strong, and gluey" (Campbell 1995: 457). This seriously impolite and insulting use of language serves the dual purpose of confusing the judges by shifting the blame from Volpone to Celia and Bonario and of further ingratiating the speakers to Volpone. The dupes have not yet given up hope of becoming Volpone's heir and, therefore, they do everything to please Volpone, they even attack the dignity of their own families. In this case it is not polite language which covers up the hidden motives of the speakers but on the contrary violently offensive language which serves exactly the same purpose.

In this extract we see again several reactions to the politeness value. The 1st Avvocato first protests "no more" (line 119), and the Notaro doubles up with "preserve the honour of the court" (line 120). Corvino promises to oblige and to also preserve the "modesty of your most reverend ears" (line 121). The statements by Corbaccio and Corvino are clearly meant to be outrageous in the context of a court. Thus, the analyst has discursive confirmation of the impoliteness values of what Corbaccio and Corvino say in the context of the court.

5. Summary and conclusion

The analysis of Ben Jonson's play *Volpone, or the Fox* has shown several things. As a play full of deception and intrigue it has turned out to provide rich materials for analyses of polite and impolite behaviour. The surface politeness often is in conflict with the characters' real intentions. The nature of a play as fictional language has the advantage of giving the analyst a better insight into the hidden motives of the characters, and, therefore, it is easier to tease apart speaker intentions and actual behaviour. In real life, the analyst can only take communicative behaviour at its face value. He or she has no, or only limited, access to the real motives of the speakers. In a play, the author often provides clues for the audience. Characters often spell out their real intentions in other scenes, either in soliloquies or in interaction with other characters. In the context of the fictional world, Volpone projects a truer image of his own character when he interacts with Mosca, while he provides a deceptive image to all the other characters of the play. Part of the audience's pleasure derives from the conflict of the different levels. The audience knows more than the characters on the stage.

Obviously, the politeness and impoliteness patterns encountered in this play cannot be taken in any straightforward way to be representative of everyday face-to-face

communication in London at the time of Ben Jonson. The reality depicted in this play is a stage reality. It is very likely that it is not entirely disconnected from Ben Jonson's real world, but an analysis of a play should be seen as saying something about this play and not necessarily about Early Modern English in general.

On a theoretical level, I have tried to show the potential of a discursive approach to historical data. In some cases we have explicit comments by the characters on the politeness level of the ongoing interactions. Such comments provide first hand information on the politeness or impoliteness value of specific linguistic expressions and their actual use in specific situations. And in addition a careful study of the "discursive structuring and reproductions of forms of behaviour" (Locher and Watts 2005: 16) reveals much about the interaction of the semantic politeness values of linguistic expressions and the pragmatic politeness values of the utterances in the specific contexts in which they are used. This kind of approach does not lend itself to a quantitative analysis of politeness levels. It seems very unlikely that it could be used in the same way in which Kopytko (1993, 1995) used the approach by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Brown and Gilman (1989) to quantify politeness strategies in Shakespearean plays. But it can be used for microanalyses of specific scenes in order to dissect the linguistic behaviour of individual characters in contrast to their real motives. A discursive approach, thus, provides a particularly rich perspective on the structure of politeness and impoliteness in play texts.

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